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PLUS
CHRISTOPHER FOWLER:
FREAK ZONE
AND
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Christopher Fowler

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FREAK ZONE
CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

My former agent once told me, "I accept any kind of fiction except science fiction." When I asked her why, she explained, "I just don't think I could do it justice," which was a polite way of saying that she didn't understand it. But to me, not understanding everything was the point and purpose of reading.

I started buying books in the late sixties, when the most astonishingly subversive novels were being published as mainstream paperbacks. As a consequence I was seduced into choosing a huge number of experimental books just by their covers and the fact that they were cheap. If you start with J.G. Ballard at an early age, you soon accept everything else as normal. Paperbacks were traded at school, and reading SF was considered cool in a time before demographics and the lazy stereotyping of SF readers had emerged. This also allowed me to find my tribe, writers and illustrators who questioned everything and shunned normalcy. Over the years I wrote a number of SF stories that publishers anxiously sought to rebrand in any other genre, not realising that SF itself has as many complex sub-strata as crime fiction. My agent had failed to appreciate that liking SF didn't require you to like *all* SF, in the same way that I enjoy mysteries but struggle with procedurals or cosies.

I started hanging around London's SF bookstores when a shop called Dark They Were And Golden-Eyed existed in Soho's Berwick Street, and moved to Forbidden Planet when it opened, at a time when such places still acted as social clubs for the unusual-minded. The theft of SF into branded empires catering to specific ages and social groups brought about an end to this strange camaraderie, and I became bored with genre reading, which had grown too polite and repetitive for my fiercely-baptised tastes. It seemed to me that frightening and difficult ideas were no longer being presented, that characters, plots and themes too frequently arrived in pre-digested forms – and so it remained until a partial move to Barcelona, where I discovered the Freak Zone, an entire block of strange and wonderful shops, cafes and meetings spots to which it seemed that all of Europe's wilder minds had gravitated. Here were people united by their love of unclassifiable fiction and shops that sold adult SF literature, not collectables.

When you seek to rediscover the love of something you read or saw at an earlier age, it's easy to fall into a nostalgic frame of mind. Albert Camus once said that the whole of our adult lives are spent attempting to regain the first two or three images that gained access to our hearts, but reading new genre fiction forces you out of that comfort zone and into the freak zone. At a meeting of small press writers I picked up a number of volumes that restored the thrill of discovering something brave and new. I've found my zone again, and this time no-one's going to take it away from me.

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interviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

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JONATHAN McCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED

YESTERDAY'S PLAYS FOR TODAY

Between 1970 and 1984, BBC One aired over three hundred standalone dramas as part of their *Play for Today* anthology programme. During its fourteen year run, the series launched the directorial careers of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh as well as producing such classics of television drama as Leigh's *Nuts in May*, Alan Clarke's *Scum*, and Dennis Potter's *Brimstone & Treacle*. However, while the strand is now best known for its contributions to the canon of British TV drama, it also produced more than its fair share of genre stories. In fact, one of its science fiction stories (Alan Gibson's *The Flipside of Dominick Hide*) proved so successful that the producers commissioned not only a rather ill-received sequel but also a spin-off series entitled *Play for Tomorrow*.

While much of *Play for Today* and all of *Play for Tomorrow* remains locked away in the BBC vaults, searching a particular video streaming site might very well yield not only an excellent adaptation of Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* but also an eerily prescient play entitled *Shades* in which a group of screen-addled youngsters from a distracted future happen upon the idea of researching a 1980s theme party only to find themselves being infected by such 'old fashioned' ideas as believing in the possibility of political change. Thankfully, the British Film Institute has been working quite hard to bring a lot of these works back into circulation meaning that a new generation of fans can now connect (or not) with one of the most under-appreciated corners of Britain's genre heritage. For example, James MacTaggart's *Robin Redbreast* and John Mackenzie's *Red Shift* shine an interesting light on evolving attitudes towards the sexual liberation of women and while one work was made much later than the other, it is actually the older of the two plays that contains the more progressive set of attitudes.

Often seen as being part of the same short-lived 'Folk Horror' movement as Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* and Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, *Robin Redbreast* opens on a female TV writer surveying the wreckage of her last relationship from the safety of an isolated cottage. Having decided to keep out of London in an effort to clear her head, the protagonist soon finds her liberty curtailed by a colourful set of local traditions. Initially, the writer treats these beliefs with all the patronising scorn that a middle-class Londoner can muster but she soon comes to realise that the locals expect her to buy into their worldview in much the same way as she bought into their village.

The foreground of *Robin Redbreast* is dominated by the tension between a modern, professional woman and a culture that expects women to fit into a narrow set of roles. At first, the writer quite enjoys the old-fashioned romance of a village that cares enough about her welfare to guide her into the path of a handsome young man but when her birth control mysteriously disappears and the young man starts lecturing her on his favourite SS regiments, she realises that the village is less interested in her happiness than in the perpetuation of certain ancient rites and rituals.

Unlike *The Wicker Man*, the play tempers its attack on rural conservatism by suggesting that city-dwellers are just as likely to exert pressure on wayward women as their country cousins. For example, the play's single most chilling moments comes when one of the writer's London friends asks whether she ever hears male laughter and drunken voices carried on the wind through the trees. The writer's horrified face says that while she may never have heard anything of the sort, she'll almost certainly be struggling not to hear it the next time the wind blows. When asked why he would try to implant such a horrific idea in the mind of a friend, the man simply states that he is fed up of her wasting away in the countryside when she should be back in London applying for jobs and going to dinner parties.

Robin Redbreast captures a profound ambivalence that many of us have about British history and tradition: At first, the writer is charmed by the authentic local colour but the deeper her connection to the village, the harder it becomes to ignore the dark corners and ugly edges of the place she now calls home. This vision of British history as an onion whose shop-soiled outer layers serve only to contain the pungent aroma of horrors past

resonates throughout the history of British genre, through the work of Nigel Kneale and all the way to John Mackenzie's excellent adaptation of Alan Garner's novel *Red Shift*.

Arguably best known for *The Owl Service*, Garner wrote a succession of children's fantasy novels that rework traditional British folk tales while drawing on Garner's obsession with the language and geography of his native Cheshire. Scattered across three different timeframes, *Red Shift* begins with a young couple who are about to be parted by the girl's decision to move to London and become a nurse. This sudden departure leaves the boy completely prostrate as spending time with the girl was his only means of escaping the TV and sex noises that permeate his parents' small caravan. The play's narrative begins in earnest when the boy's mother confronts the couple about their sexual activities only for the boy to break down in tears at the very suggestion that he would "abuse the hospitality" of his girlfriend's parents. The boy's intense fear of socio-sexual transgression turns out to be the animating principle behind the entire play as *Red Shift* is all about navigating the boundary between the sacred and the profane.

The foreground of Robin Redbreast is dominated by the tension between a modern, professional woman and a culture that expects women to fit into a narrow set of roles

Aside from sharing a setting (the Cheshire village of Mow Cop), the play's three timeframes are connected by the presence of an ancient axe and mystical visions echoing the boy's distress at the beginning of the play. All three timeframes feature a couple whose relationship is complicated by the perceived presence of the divine: In the case of the oldest timeframe, an ancient Briton meets a teenaged girl who is serving as her tribe's corn goddess and while the couple develop a tangible bond, the boy's fear of breaking taboo means that he refrains from raping the goddess and so escapes her terrible wrath. The young man in the civil war timeframe also experiences visions but this only serves to position him at one corner of a love triangle involving his wife and her previous (more lusty) boyfriend. Incapable of understanding why a worldly woman would suddenly take up with such an unworldly man, the community's sociopathic leader interprets the woman's professed attraction to the divine as a sign of profound duplicity and imminent betrayal. The play ends with the boy from the present day realising that his girlfriend is no longer a virgin and turning against both her and the ancient stone axe that served as the sacred icon of their relationship. Though very different in terms of their languages, psychologies and religions, the play's timeframes all give voice the idea that sexuality is somehow fundamentally incompatible with the sacred.

Though both *Robin Redbreast* and *Red Shift* explore the transmutation of women into sexual and religious objects, it is interesting to note that only *Robin Redbreast* presents this transformation as being in any way problematic, unpleasant or dehumanising. The female characters in *Red Shift* are strong and beautifully drawn but the play's sympathies seem to be dependent upon their continued sexual purity. Garner's script presents us with a clear moral dichotomy between the women who are chaste and the women who decide to throw that purity away by prioritising the satisfaction of their own sexual urges. According to *Red Shift*, women who abandon that state of virginal grace are not just betraying the sexless men who would grovel at their feet, they are also engaging in an act of profanity so monstrously blasphemous that it will literally scar the landscape and echo down the ages.

Mackenzie's adaptation of Alan Garner's novel ends on a magnificently ambiguous shot of the ancient axe, now resplendent on a museum's silken pillow. As the play fades to black, you cannot help but wonder whether the implication might not be that all women should share the axe's fate and be locked away as objects of veneration.

NINA ALLAN'S TIME PIECES

ELECTION SPECIAL: THE HUGOS, THE PUPPIES, AND THE BIG PILE OF POO

Personally, I count literary awards as a good thing. They encourage the discussion of books, not just of individual titles but of what we expect and need from literature in general and the field of science fiction in particular. But all awards are not the same, and if the discussions they promote are to be meaningful, we should take care in identifying the aims and characteristics of each, so we may better assimilate the results they ultimately yield.

Juried awards have a clear advantage in terms of their perceived fairness. Whilst we the audience cannot be privy to the judging process, we can usually remain confident that the judges have read and considered all the submitted works, that they have read and considered *the same* submitted works, and that none of the judges was coerced (or coerced the others) into voting for an outcome they didn't support. If we set store by the results of juried awards, it is because we have a broad faith in the application of knowledge to reasoned debate.

Awards that are voted on by fans will play out differently, and are often criticised by their detractors as being 'popularity contests'. The perception among such critics is that it is not the 'best' books that are most likely to win, but those whose authors have the most clout in terms of online influence, media presence, or numbers of fans and/or friends within the SFF community. With such unpredictable and fluctuating forces in play, it is something of a miracle that the shortlists and final results of fan awards display as much variation and diversity as they do. While the accusations of log-rolling and excessive campaigning will doubtless continue, we should remember that fan awards, by their very capriciousness, do have real value, not just in offering fans some ownership of the awards process, but in taking a sometimes skewed, sometimes out of focus but nonetheless revealing snapshot of what the fan electorate, and by extension the field at large, considers to be of relevance and interest.

Which brings us, somewhat inevitably, to the Hugos. The Hugos are not alone in courting scandal. Both the Nebulas and the Stokers have had their share of controversy, and it is only a couple of years since the British Fantasy Awards meltdown, a crisis in confidence so severe it led to a complete revamping of the awards rules. No individual or group of individuals was to blame for what happened with the BFAs. Neither was the system corrupt. Rather, the breakdown of the awards came about largely because only a small number of those entitled to vote actually cast their ballots. A core electorate, in other words, most of whom happened to be supporters of the same party. The result was not the 'fault' of those voters, nor of the party they voted for. If we are to lay blame anywhere, then it can only be with the remainder of the registered electorate, those who had opinions but who disenfranchised themselves. Who declined, or forgot, or could not be bothered to make their mark on the pertinent piece of electronic paper.

The partially juried system introduced in 2012 to clean up the BFAs was voted on by BFS members, and has so far proved successful in revitalising the awards. What seems a shame is that this wholly desirable result could only be achieved at the expense of a partial disempowerment of the constituency. It's fascinating to note that of the many voices currently speculating upon the future of the Hugo Awards, none seems even to have considered such a drastic solution. The Hugos have long been, and remain, proudly fannish. For those whose allegiance to the award remains stalwart in the face of every difficulty, the idea of changing the essential nature of the award would appear to be unthinkable. As someone who believes in the importance of maintaining a mixed roster of fan and juried awards, I'm inclined to agree with them.

It might be easy to convince ourselves that the Hugos don't matter, that no one outside of fandom gives a damn anyway. I disagree. For many new readers and writers coming up, the Hugo 'brand' is synonymous with quality. I believe we owe it to them to see this tradition continued. I am writing this essay in the fallout from this year's Eastercon, where an unscheduled emergency panel on the state of the Hugos played out to a packed house in the largest of

As for this year, it may be outside the spirit of the Hugos to treat them as an election, but the Puppies, in deploying election strategy, have left me no choice

the available conference rooms. People care, and witnessing the passion and commitment of that audience almost made up for the disappointment, bewilderment and anger that greeted the announcement of the nominations the evening before. The question of what is to be done is trickier. As with the BFAs, the biggest obstacle to immediate change is that the conservative bloc-voters who have impacted so disastrously on this year's Hugos have not broken any rules. Like any effective political party, all the Sad Puppies have done is get themselves organised. The only surprise is that something like this hasn't happened before.

One of the most moving and articulate comments I have read on the current controversy came from fan and writer Abi Sutherland at the Making Light forum:

> "When I sit alone with my Hugo nomination page and try to wrestle through the eligibility lists, thinking about the things I've enjoyed over the past year, I'm faced with the fact that my relationship with literature is both more and less than political. As a single person reacting to what the field has produced I must listen, as well as speak in the way that someone voting en bloc need not. And doing this thing alone, I can't dictate what 'should' win. I cannot change the Hugos. But I can be changed by them. The relationship is not political, not pragmatic, but mystical."

Her words, for me, express perfectly the ideal and essence of what voting in the Hugos – or indeed any fan award – should feel like, the spirit in which the vast majority of fans would like to see them maintained. I think this is largely the reason that the idea of drawing up a 'counter-slate' to oppose the Puppy ballots next year has gained so little support. People understand instinctively that although the Puppies have not technically broken the rules, what they have done runs counter to everything the Hugos are supposed to stand for. To respond with like for like would be to further embed this tendency and deepen the crisis.

While some kind of rule-change aimed at reducing the impact of bloc voting may well be desirable, without a significant increase in actual voter participation, the results of such a rule-change may still be compromised. Of this year's fifteen thousand eligible voters, roughly two thousand cast nominations ballots. The surest solution to the Puppy crisis in future lies in persuading individual voters that their engagement is important, that it is not up to the World Science Fiction Society to effect change on their behalf, that the buck stops with them.

As for this year, it may be outside the spirit of the Hugos to treat them as an election, but the Puppies, in deploying election strategy, have left me no choice. In the normal run of things, I am very much of the 'judge the works and not the personalities' cast of mind, but I cannot escape the conclusion that anyone retreating to such a position at the present time stands in danger of denying the grim reality of what is occurring. While the 'moderate' Puppies – like certain politicians – might claim their aims are legitimate and non-threatening, it is clear from their more unguarded statements and from the heinously bigoted, retrograde and reprehensible comments of their hangers-on that what they want, not just in terms of social engineering but of literary ambition also, is to

put a road-block on the forward progress of the imagination. This is a political act, and demands a political response. It seems doubly strange to me that even the more low-key Puppies are unable to recognise that the 'golden age' of the Hugos to which they say they want to return never existed. If you look down the list of past Hugo winners and nominees, you'll see that the award has *always* been a melting pot of ideas, styles, worldviews and stances: Heinlein against Vonnegut, Miller against Budrys, Haldeman against Pournelle, Delany against McCaffrey, Card against Vinge. These writers were then not the old guard, but the new and upcoming authors of their day. If the true spirit of science fiction is anti anything, it is stagnation.

My initial reaction on seeing this year's ballot was to walk away in disgust. I've now decided that this is the worst thing I could do. I want to signal my contempt for what has been done, and my personal commitment to preventing such outrageous mockery of readers and writers in the future. Those nominees who find themselves on the ballot legitimately deserve my consideration and they will get it. As for the rest, I shall leave them to the judgement of a certain Noah Ward. He has a remarkable legal mind, I am told, and perfectly suited for settling disputes of exactly this type.

Coming soon: stories by Ken Altabef, Sara Saab, Richard Strachan and others, plus all the usual nonfiction and Martin Hanford's 'Green Tea' cover art.

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Puppygate. To widespread dismay and outrage, this year's Hugo shortlist was successfully (and even legally, if discreditably) gamed by factions calling themselves 'Sad Puppies' and 'Rabid Puppies' who bloc-voted on closely similar slates. Since ordinary voters' nominations are scattered over a wide range of personal preferences, the slates crowded all opposition off many ballot categories. After the shortlist announcement, Marko Kloos withdrew his slate-promoted novel *Lines of Departure* on ethical grounds, making a place – as it turned out – for Cixin Liu among the novel finalists: *Ancillary Sword* by Ann Leckie, *The Dark Between the Stars* by Kevin J. Anderson, *The Goblin Emperor* by Katherine Addison (Sarah Monette), *Skin Game* by Jim Butcher and *The Three Body Problem* by Cixin Liu, trans Ken Liu. (Anderson and Butcher were slate choices.) In several categories there's likely to be considerable tactical use of the voting option 'No Award'.

Lavie Tidhar tweeted: 'Truly it's an honour just to not be nominated.'

K.J. Parker, after much speculation – and a period of disinformation when this uncomic fantasy author was said to be female – has been revealed as the pseudonym of Tom Holt. Were you expecting someone taller? (*Pornokitsch*, 21 April)

Novel/Lifetime Awards. *Bookseller YA Book Prize* (inaugural): Louise O'Neill, *Only Ever Yours*. • *BSFA*: Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Sword*. • *Horror Writers Association* life achievement: Jack Ketchum, Tanith Lee. • *Kitschies*: Andrew Smith, *Grasshopper Jungle*. Debut: Hermione Eyre, *Viper Wine*. • *James Herbert* for horror (inaugural): Craig Davidson writing as Nick Cutter, *The Troop*. • *James Tiptree Jr* for gender-bending fiction (tie): Monica Byrne, *The Girl in the Road*; Jo Walton, *My Real Children*. • *Philip K. Dick*: Meg Elison, *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*. • *Prometheus* (libertarian) life achievement: F. Paul Wilson. • *SFWA Grand Master*: Larry Niven. • *Solstice* (SFWA life achievement): Joanna Russ, Stanley Schmidt.

Deep Literary Insight Dept. 'If you give Frodo Baggins a mobile phone, *The Lord of the Rings* becomes a considerably shorter book.' (*New Humanist*) Not unless you give someone else a mobile phone too. (See also: *palantír*.)

Ted Chiang acquired a surprise collaborator in an *Independent* snippet about the forthcoming Paramount film *Story of Your Life*: 'Adapted from a short story by Nebula and Ted Chiang…'

Oook! An ebook of *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*, planned as an Orangutan Foundation fundraiser, had to be cancelled owing to microbusiness-hostile European VAT changes. See ae.ansible.uk/?id=vatmoss.

Ramsey Campbell will receive an honorary fellowship from Liverpool John Moores University

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

in July 'for his outstanding contribution to literature'.

The Weakest Link. 'Which of these pairs is named after a French theologian and an English philosopher? Is it (a) Calvin and Hobbes, (b) Wallace and Gromit, or (c) Dastardly and Muttley?' Contestant: 'Dastardly and Muttley.' (ITV, *The Chase*)

H.R. Giger's name has been given to a carnivorous Nepenthes pitcher-plant hybrid of 'nightmarish appearance' which in close-up looks like 'a frightening alien landscape'. (*Telegraph*)

Neil Clarke reports that the most popular story title from the *Clarkesworld* slushpile, appearing 18 times in 50,000+ submissions, is: 'Dust'.

Kazuo Ishiguro, having worried in public about whether his *The Buried Giant* would suffer the stigma of genre ('Will readers follow me into this? Will they understand what I'm trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements? Are they going to say this is fantasy?' – *NY Times*) and received a ticking-off from Ursula K. Le Guin ('Well, yes, they probably will. Why not? It appears that the author takes the word for an insult.' – Bookviewcafe.com), retorted that Le Guin is 'entitled to like my book or not like my book, but as far as I am concerned, she's got the wrong person. I am on the side of the pixies and the dragons.' (*Guardian*)

John Wyndham was commemorated in May by the naming of a previously nameless London NW3 passageway as Triffid Alley. Local resident and Wyndham biographer David Ketterer identified this wheelie-bin repository as the very alley used to escape vegetable horror in chapter 8 of the novel.

As Others See Us. David Mitchell on genre and Ishiguro: '"Fantasy plus literary fiction can achieve things that frank blank realism can't," said Mr Mitchell, who added that he hoped *The Buried Giant* would help to "de-stigmatize" fantasy. "Bending the laws of what we call reality in a novel doesn't necessarily lead to elves saying 'Make haste! These woods will be swarming with orcs by nightfall.'"' (*NY Times*) As bad as having fairies spout stuff like 'Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.'

David V. Barrett, two years after finding his *Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions* (1996, 1998) extensively plagiarised in UWE Bristol academic Stephen J. Hunt's *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction* (Ashgate Publishing, 2003), was rewarded with a grovelling quarter-page apology from Ashgate and Hunt in *The Bookseller*.

W. Heath Robinson is to have his own London museum, opening in 2016 with a large collection of his drawings (including typically bizarre contraptions from World Wars I and II) recently saved from dispersal by UK arts grants. (*Independent*)

Thog's Masterclass. *Supervillain Angst.* 'If his present endeavours failed, he would surely be dead, and if they succeeded, the universe would be doomed. He had nothing left to look forward to – nothing at all.' (Gordon Eklund as E.E. Smith, *Lord Tedric: Alien Realms*, 1980) • *Secrets of the Illuminati.* 'Then he looked thoughtful, and slowly a crimson flush spread around his ears. Eventually his earlobes, unusually large and awkward, were illuminated like traffic lights.' (Anne Holt, *Death of the Demon*, 1995; trans Anne Bruce 2013) • 'He literally shone and, if he'd been hung from the ceiling, he'd have looked like another lamp.' (Alicia Giménez-Bartlett, *Death Rites*, 1996; trans Jonathan Dunne 2008) • *Hot Potato Dept.* 'They stared at me, squinting as if I were holding a supernova.' (Catherine Asaro, *Undercity*, 2014)

R.I.P.

Patrick H. Adkins (1948–2015), US author, editor, publisher and fan who wrote the Titan mythological fantasy trilogy (1997–1990) and the sf/horror *The Third Beast* (2000), died on 7 April aged 67.

Ted Ball (1942–2015), long-time proprietor of London's much-loved sf bookshop Fantasy Centre (1969–2009, initially in partnership with Dave Gibson and later with Erik Arthur), died on 18 March.

Dennis Barker (1929–2015), UK journalist and author whose future-dystopian novel is *Winston Three Three Three* (1987), died on 2 March aged 85.

Harve Bennett (1930–2015), US producer of four *Star Trek* films – *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986) and *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989) – died on 25 February aged 84.

Nancy Carrigan (1933–2014), who with husband Richard Carrigan wrote *The Siren Stars* (1971) and *Minotaur in a Mushroom Maze* (1976 *Analog*), died on 18 July 2014 aged 81.

Inge Eriksen (1935–2015), noted Danish mainstream feminist author who published much highly regarded sf from 1980 to 1991 – beginning with the stage play *The Wind is Not for Sale* and continuing with several novels – died on 13 March; she was 79.

Pauline Fisk (1948–2015), UK author of unconventional fantasy for children whose first novel *Midnight Blue* (1990) won the Smarties Prize, died on 25 January; she was 66.

Fred Fredericks (1929–2015), US newspaper strip artist who drew (and later scripted) *Mandrake the Magician* from 1965 until he retired in 2013, died on 10 March aged 85.

Günter Grass (1927–2015), Polish-born German author who received the Nobel Prize in 1999, died on 13 April aged 87. Fantastic elements appear in some of his novels, in particular the famous *The Tin Drum* (1959; filmed 1979) and the animal fantasies *The Flounder* (1977) and *The Rat* (1986).

Roy McKie, US cartoonist and illustrator best known for a number of children's-book collaborations with Dr Seuss, died on 8 January; he was 93.

Leonard Nimoy (1931–2015), actor, writer and director universally known for his role as the half-Vulcan Mr Spock in the original *Star Trek* (1966–1969) plus spin-off films (two of which he directed) and series, died on 27 February. His two autobiographies were *I Am Not Spock* (1975) and *I Am Spock* (1995).

Mal Peet (1947–2015), UK author whose YA fiction won the Carnegie Medal and *Guardian* Prize, died on 2 March aged 67. *Cloud Tea Monkeys* (1999 with his wife Elspeth Graham) is a children's fairytale; the adult *The Murdstone Trilogy* (2014) sends up the heroic-fantasy industry.

Carol Severance (1944–2015), US author of *Reefsong* (1991; Compton Crook Award winner) and the 1992–1993 'Island Warriors' trilogy, died on 19 February.

Bertrice Small (1937–2015), US romance author whose several romantic fantasies include *A Moment in Time* (1991) and the 'World of Hetar' series (2005–2010), died on 24 February; she was 77.

Ryder Syvertsen (1941–2015), US author best known for the 1984–1991 'Doomsday Warrior' survivalist sf sequence as by Ryder Stacy (early volumes written with Jan Stacy), died on 24 February; he was 73.

Rob Wilkins

Terry Pratchett (1948–2015), who as the creator of the stupendously popular Discworld comic fantasies and many other bestselling novels needs no introduction, died on 12 March and was mourned worldwide. He was 66 and had been knighted in 2009; genre honours included a 2010 World Fantasy Award for life achievement. Terry carried on determinedly in the wake of his 2007 diagnosis with a rare form of Alzheimer's, but had to cease public appearances in 2012.

READERS' POLL RESULTS

1
Fly Away Home
Suzanne Palmer

2
Marielena
Nina Allan

3=
Beside the Dammed River
D.J. Cockburn
Dark on a Darkling Earth
T.R. Napper

5=
Must Supply Own Work Boots
Malcolm Devlin
The Posset Pot
Neil Williamson

7=
Ashes
Karl Bunker
Wake Up, Phil
Georgina Bruce

9=
Ghost Story
John Grant
Predvestniki
Greg Kurzawa
The Damaged
Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam

12=
Finding Waltzer-Three
Tim Major
My Father and the Martian Moon Maids
James Van Pelt
The Bars of Orion
Caren Gussoff
The Golden Nose
Neil Williamson
The Mortuaries
Katharine E.K. Duckett
Bone Deep
S.L. Nickerson
Monoculture
Tom Greene
Songs Like Freight Trains
Sam J. Miller
Two Truths and a Lie
Oliver Buckram

The winner of this year's Readers' Poll is Suzanne Palmer with 'Fly Away Home' (issue #251). She narrowly edged out 'Marielena' by Nina Allan (issue #254), with T.R. Napper's 'Dark on a Darkling Earth' (issue #254) and D.J. Cockburn's 'Beside the Dammed River' (issue #253, winner of the James White Award) tying for third. The top stories in this year's poll (note a number of ties) are listed on the left.

The number of votes rose slightly from last year, but is still a very small percentage of the total readership.

The decline of negative voting continues. There were only twelve negative votes this year – a record low since I took over the poll a decade ago. However, for the second consecutive year a story received a negative aggregate score – a rare event – and one (different) story received no positive votes at all – something that hasn't happened since 2006. This year's most controversial stories – each receiving significant positive and negative votes – were 'The Labyrinth of Thorns' by C. Allegra Hawksmoor (issue #250), 'Bullman and the Wiredling Mutha' by R.M. Graves (issue #255) and 'Lilacs and Daffodils' by Rebecca Campbell (issue #250).

The most popular issue, by some margin, was issue #254, while issue #250 proved the least popular with half the number of positive votes as issue #254. The issues are presented below in order of popularity.

Thanks, as always, to all the readers who took part and especially to all of you who took the time to comment. One notable trend in this year's comments was the praise you gave to the magazine's nonfiction – both the newcomers (Jonathan McCalmont and Nina Allan) and the long running columns. They are clearly appreciated by many readers.

Martin McGrath

a shout is a prayer for the waiting centuries by T.R. Napper

illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

I'll give you a roll of barbwire
A vine for this modern epoch
Climbing all over our souls
That's our love, take it, don't ask

"Any food?" asked Phuong.

"No food," replied the woman.

"Rice, old rice, bamboo shoots. Anything."

"No food."

"I have a child. We haven't eaten in two days."

"We all have children. Here, take some water."

Phuong reached out in the darkness, a smooth, cool wooden ladle caressed her hand. She fumbled for the bucket, filled the scoop with water, and held it out for her daughter, who grabbed it and slurped noisily. Phuong felt for Trung and passed the scoop to him. He rested his hand on her shoulder as he drank. Her skin tingled at his touch, familiar, yet always new. Then she took her turn, cracked lips and swollen tongue welcoming the cool stream of water.

Her eyes adjusted to the dark as they drank; further along someone had a battery-powered lamp, its thin glow enough to paint the outline of those hiding in the rough-ceilinged room underground. Women and children, not many men. Not many of those left. Not many young women of fighting age, either.

The woman who'd passed her the water had an AK-47 slung over her shoulder. The sheen of the polished metal gleamed in outline.

"How long has the bombing lasted, older sister?" asked Phuong.

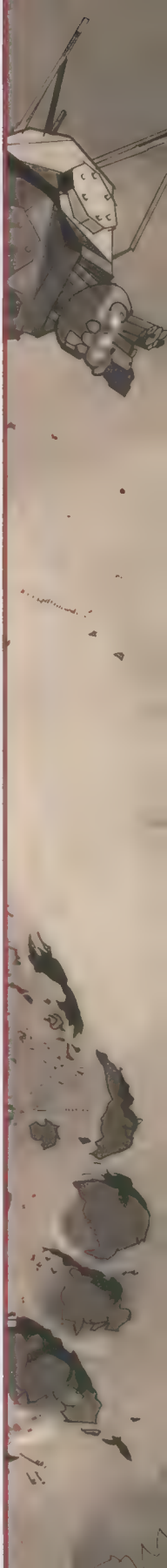
"Hard to count," said the woman. Her face was impassive, drawn. "Two days, maybe three. The freewave's jammed, nanos unusable. Time's different, down here."

Thunder rumbled in the distance, long, growing.

"They are coming," whispered the woman. "Get down."

They did. Huddled together, pressed against the dirt floor, covering the child with their bodies. Phuong hugged her daughter, who was so good, so quiet. Three years old, and never complained, never cried. Trung, his lean arms around his wife. Holding them both.

The storm came.



None of them could take their eyes off the meat. Sizzling, marinating, tantalizing, just lying there within reach, in rows on silver frying pans. The head chef, tall white hat askew, loitered nearby like a bull mastiff over a fresh bone, growling at any of the staff who came too close. Behind the chef, behind the others, all around, were invisible cameras with eyes cool and unblinking, watching the rows of real meat, ensuring the integrity of each rare, tender morsel.

George Duulngari let his eyes linger, like everyone else, as he passed through the kitchen. He straightened the white jacket they'd given him as he walked, too tight across the shoulders, too much room around the waist. He moved through the bustle, the swarm of waiters and waitresses and assistant chefs and despotic minor managers bustling around the gleaming cleansteel kitchens. They made room for him, back here, all of them.

Back here they knew who he used to be; out there they didn't give a damn. George took a deep breath, face carefully blank, and walked out into the ballroom. From the heat and hustle of the kitchens to the leisurely orbiting souls in the cool, crisp air of the grand ballroom. It was brighter, out here, everything was brighter. The gowns and the suits and the glowing, flawless skin and most of all, the teeth. The straight, even rows of designer teeth. Each a symmetrical stanza, a polished white tribute to the wealth and standing of the owner.

Somewhere, classical music played while the guests circled each other with the empty smiles and polite nods that only the truly rich could perfect. Their conversations like stones briefly skipping across the surface of their own narcissism, across some tantalizing reveal of the wonder of their own identity, before they departed to a new group to skim their stones across. To a new group with ready vacant smiles, each waiting politely for their turn to speak about themselves.

George picked up a tray and plotted a careful course through. It held Australian sparkling wine and Belgian beer and Californian cider, together worth a week's pay, maybe two.

George eased his way through fragments of conversation, offering the drinks to those who caught his eye.

"…that colour is divine – vermillion?"

"…my concern is nanotech diversity; we've got to wait days…"

George paused as a woman with superfluous eyeglasses signalled to him. She was talking to a man attempting a regal bearing. She said to the man: "Then the waitress served *me* the Bluefin sashimi and my *husband* the Wagyu beef. That, professor, is the sort of everyday prejudice that sadly still exists." She paused to pluck a glass of champagne from the tray and continued talking. She didn't look at George. He slipped away, unnoticed, a ghost haunting the lives of the living.

"…for environmental reasons, converting the home theatre to a…"

"…thinking of having a new face printed for my birthday…"

"…have you seen the new…"

"…a Vinyasa retreat in the foothills of Ubud…"

(Swirls wine glass) "…comes on *wide* to the palate, now doesn't it…"

"Waiter. You there. *Waiter.*"

George slowed, the automation of his drink delivery disturbed. He looked around to see a woman and a man, both tall and attractive in the most standard and forgettable of ways, looking at him. The man smiled. George couldn't help but stare at his teeth. They shimmered in the lights of the ballroom, hovering in space like the Cheshire cat's. The woman had a matching, disingenuous smile and a red dot on her forehead, between her eyes. The latest token of this mob's faddish spiritualism, he figured.

The man was saying something.

"Sorry?" asked George.

"I said," sighed the man, apparently irritated at having to repeat himself, "I'd like a double of single malt and some French Champagne for my partner."

George held out the tray so she could take a flute of the sparkling.

The man's eyes narrowed. "*French* Champagne, not the insipid Australian version. And a double of *single malt* whisky, and make damn sure it is an *Islay*, the best that this place has." His wife suppressed a laugh (obviously, the way people do when they want you to see them pre-

tending to be polite) when her man said *insipid Australian version.*

George thought about a straight right to the bridge of the man's nose, the spurt of blood, the roar of the crowd.

Instead he nodded. "Right away."

And so the night continued, with the rich exercising their prodigious appetite for expensive alcohol and food, and the remainders servicing those appetites. There was a lull sometime after nine and George sat down on one of the plastic crates near the kitchen's exit, prying off his shoes with a relieved internalized groan. The shoes he'd borrowed from his neighbour were too narrow for his feet, the soles worn and thin.

He leaned back, head against the warm polycrete wall, and closed his eyes. A commotion a half-minute later made him open them again.

A waitress was walking between benches, tray of plates in hand, a half-dozen wait staff crowding behind her. When she dumped the tray near the sinks, the crowd increased. George slipped his shoes back on and walked over, pushing through the mob.

Sitting on one of the plates was rump steak, half eaten. It filled the air with the scent of its iron-rich opulence. The young waitress, with pretty eyes and crooked teeth she'd try to hide by never smiling, turned to the chef, nearby.

"We can eat it, right?" she asked.

He nodded. "The contracts are lax here. They don't cover garbage."

"Who gets it?" she asked, and it was clear she wanted it to be her. Everyone standing there wanted it.

The chef looked around at the staff. "I don't care. Just as long as you don't stand around staring at it all fucking night. I want the wait staff out of my kitchen, now." He turned without waiting for a reply and moved along the bench to where a line of rich chocolate-and-truffle desserts were being created by keenly focused young chefs.

"It's mine," said George. He didn't have a loud voice; in fact Nhung always accused him of mumbling. But everyone heard him.

The girl with the crooked teeth made a thin line with her mouth and turned her eyes to the floor. The others backed away.

As George grabbed the plate someone said: "Now just a minute there."

George turned and looked down at one of the managers. Bill or Bryan or something, young, had a habit of giving out superfluous instructions to people who knew their work a lot better than he did.

The young manager's smooth face started to redden. "I mean, you can't just take it." He didn't say it strong, didn't attach himself to the words. Just surrendered the sentence to the air.

George looked him in the eye. The man looked away. George turned without a word, plate in hand, and pushed his way through the back door, twenty pairs of eyes glaring at his back.

The still, dry heat of the night hit him as he exited. Quiet, outside. Just the low whine of a hydrogen generator and in the distance, a barking dog. Overhead he imagined he could hear the Milky Way as it flowed, and the call of the Larrpan looking for passengers to take to Baralku. George moved along the wall to a plastic chair that had been placed under a circle of pale white from a lone overhead bulb.

He held the plate up, nostrils flaring as he inhaled the scent of the half-eaten meat. He placed the plate carefully on his knees and used knife and fork to slice off a neat triangle of steak. Pink in the centre, brown on the outside, slathered in some sauce so rich he would have drunk a cup of it, if he could. He bit down, eyes closing in pleasure as the juices lapped over his tongue, bathed his gums. As he chewed his stomach jumped in anticipation. He groaned.

Laughter – or more tittering, you'd call it – dragged his attention away. A woman and a man stood a few metres away, watching him from the shadows. The woman wore an elegant gown that exposed soft, white shoulders that gleamed under the stars. The tips of their cigarettes glowed orange in the night.

They stepped forward, closer to the circle of light. The man looked at him with contempt, the quiet curl of disdain in lip and eye. The woman – her expression was worse, much worse: pity. Like she'd just found an abandoned puppy by the side of the road.

The disdainful one said to his friend, as though George weren't even there, "They let them eat our leftovers here. Disgusting."

"Oh Xavier," said the other. Then she looked at George, nodding sympathetically as she asked: "Hungry?"

George chewed the meat and swallowed. It wanted to stick in his throat on the way down. He couldn't taste the flavours anymore.

The woman stepped closer again, into the circle of light. "It's not fair that you eat our scraps." She held out her little finger, showing the three laser-inked dots on the tip. "Let me give you a credit transfer. Go and buy yourself some fresh groceries – something *healthy*."

George stood, plate in hand. He was a head taller than her. Whatever she saw in his face, she didn't like, the film of fear running down over her eyes. She backed up out of the light, towards her friend.

"Maybe we should go, Xavier."

He agreed. They threw down their cigarettes and left, walking fast.

George stared down at the cigarettes, orange points burning out on the polycrete. Then the plate of half-eaten food, still in his hand. He clenched and unclenched his jaw, felt the string of shame on his cheeks, in his stomach. He threw the food in a nearby bin and went back to work.

I'll give you a car bomb
A car bomb exploding on a crowded street
On a crowded street exploding flesh and bones
That's our festival, don't you understand

I'll give you a savage war

"We can't live like this, husband."

"I know."

"Our daughter will die, if this goes on."

"I know."

Sweat coated their skin, dripped from the tips of their noses, rested salty on their lips. How her daughter slept, Phuong could not understand. But she did, as they sheltered under the bamboo floorboards. As the swarms of mosquitos plagued them and thunder, man-made, roared in the distance. As the scent of sweat and dirt, and the smell of something else that overlaid it all, ripe and dead, eddied in the space under the house. As the hunger plagued them, only tree bark to eat and still, dirty water to drink, the gnawing in their stomachs unceasing. Her daughter slept despite it all, thin arms above her head, little fat lips slightly parted, she slept.

"Then…" She trailed off. Not wanting to know the answer.

"South, we'll keep going south," said Trung, his voice soft and empty. "We'll keep to the Ho Chi Minh trail. There's nothing else."

"The war is everywhere. Even there. Especially there."

"I know a man."

"What man?"

"We fought together. He has a boat."

She sat in silence.

"Is that the only way?" Phuong asked.

"Yes."

"We have nothing to pay him with."

"I can pay him."

"What with?"

"I can pay."

"What with?" she repeated, quietly, her fear of his answer rising.

Trung didn't give her one. He took his old army pistol from his canvas satchel and began to clean it. Just his eyes and the pistol shone in the dimness under the floorboards. The dull, eternal metal of the gun and the bright fleeting light of his eyes.

Phuong hugged her knees and watched her daughter sleep.

George woke to opera. Drifting down caverns and tunnels, through the open front door, some old aria in a dead European language, echoing, resonating, enchanting. Old Mister Nguyen loved his opera, and everyone else down here learned to love it too, after a while. You could close the front door to the circulating air and the early morning music, if you really wished, but no one did.

It was cool underground. Still and silent, at night. George had never slept well, but he slept like the dead down below. The temperature was constant, whether it was twenty-five degrees Celsius outside or over fifty. Port Hedland was mostly over fifty these days.

He lay in bed, savouring the first few seconds of the day when you forget who you are, those few seconds before your feet hit the floor, before

the hard reality of the world comes crashing in.

He swung from the bed, feet touching the cool stone floor. The walls too, were sandstone, patterned swirls of maroon and rose left by the tunnelling machines. Easy, calming to the eye in the soft, clean light of the underworld.

He walked out to the living area.

"Yo Adrian," said George.

"Rocky," replied Nhung, smiling at him.

Nhung, her black hair tied up, was wearing her white dental assistant uniform, the dress ending around the knees. Her full lips were wet from the tea she was drinking and her eyes tired from another sleepless night with their daughter. Three years old and Kylie still needed her mother to share her bed with her before she went to sleep. Eyes tired, but warm; eyes that were a shield against others and a window for George and George alone.

George walked over to his daughter, sitting up on the high chair, drinking from a plastic cup. He kissed her on the top of the head. "Trouble, how are you?"

His daughter looked at him, put down her cup, and cocked her finger like a pistol. She blew a raspberry.

George smiled. "What was that?"

"A fart gun," said Kylie, in her squeaky little voice.

She pointed it at him again and blew another raspberry.

George grabbed his nose. "Gakh." He swayed, eyes rolling up in his head. Kylie giggled as he staggered from the small kitchen, to the open lounge, and collapsed onto the sofa. "Blurrrrgh." He played dead.

Kylie laughed.

Then he rose slowly from the sofa with arms outstretched, and let out a zombie groan.

"Are you a monster?" asked Kylie, eyes wide.

George responded with a groan and lurched towards his daughter.

She giggled and shot him again with her fart gun. George fell over and flopped around on the ground.

Nhung smiled. "Okay, enough farting, you two." She put a bowl of soy porridge in front of Kylie. "Now, eat your breakfast."

Kylie wrinkled her noise. "Yuck."

"It's good for you."

"It's stupid for me. But you can have it." Kylie tried to give her mother the bowl.

Nhung put it back in front of her. "*An di.*"

Kylie pouted. She picked up her tiny spoon and started poking the porridge with it.

George walked back to the kitchen and poured himself some coffee. He sat at the small table with a sigh and sipped. Black, bitter, thin: he didn't know it any other way.

Nhung sat opposite. Their knees touched under the table.

"How was work?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"That bad?"

He sighed and sipped his coffee.

"That bad," she said, no longer a question.

"How much do teeth cost?"

Nhung held her tea cup in both hands. "What do you mean? What sort of teeth?"

"Rich prick teeth."

"*George*," she said, eyebrows raised.

"What's a prick?" asked Kylie, distracted from her porridge shuffling.

"A naughty word, Kylie. Naughty daddy."

"Naughty daddy," repeated Kylie, grinning at him.

"Naughty daddy," he agreed. "Now eat your breakfast."

Kylie made another face and resumed poking the food with her spoon.

"Anyway," said George. "Teeth?"

"You don't want to know."

"Come on."

She sighed. "The basic treatment – straightened, whitened and nano-hardened teeth – that costs a million."

George started to swear, then caught himself. Instead he repeated, "A million." He grimaced, as though tasting something far more bitter than his coffee.

"It lasts a hundred years, once it's done. No decay, no fillings, no cleaning – not ever." Nhung sipped her tea. She laughed without humour and said: "But that's just the basic model. You can implant a connection that stimulates the pleasure centre of the brain. So you could have implants inside your teeth – fully programmable – that give you an endorphin kick, a cerebral or-

gasm when they sense you eating chocolate, for example."

George shook his head.

"My boss told me about a job he did for a rich client – an executive from the freezones. His teeth were programmed to fire neurons in the part of his brain associated with hearing. When this guy ate a particular dish – some sort of steak, I think – he'd hear a symphony."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he ate music."

They were silent. George looked at the scratched, faux wood tabletop, the flavourless food in front of his daughter, the white scars across his knuckles. "I guess that's what happens when you give people too much money."

"Lot of wealthy people at the function last night, I take it?" asked Nhung.

"What do you reckon."

"Anyone famous?"

"I don't know. Those people all look the same to me."

"White people?"

"Rich people."

She smiled. "Tell me about it. I can't see past those perfectly symmetrical teeth."

"Yeah," George said, nodding in agreement. "Same. I can't help staring. Sometimes the skin. That glows, too. But usually just the teeth. It's like I'm hypnotized."

He pressed his tongue against the gap in his own teeth. George was lucky. His genes had given him a row of mostly straight, strong teeth. A bit yellowed from his days of smoking black market tobacco, missing two halfway down one side of his mouth ('bicuspids' Nhung called them) from a fight down in Dampier when he'd lost his mouthguard halfway through the first round. But good teeth, overall.

Nhung's teeth were perfect: white, small, straight. They had to be, of course – couldn't have a dental assistant with a row of baked bean teeth. She was meticulous with them. Brushing three times a day, flossing, buying an overpriced solution to wash her gums.

They were both lucky, as far as teeth went. Most of the people underground struggled with bad teeth and gum disease. Made it harder to find work. Service industry didn't like hiring people with bad teeth. Upset the customers, they said. And if you got a rotten tooth and had to have it pulled, you were gone. The debt would crush you.

Nhung sighed, got up from her seat and went over to the small fridge. She pulled out a bowl and placed it in front of Kylie, taking away the uneaten porridge.

Kylie squealed with pleasure as she looked into the bowl.

George raised an eyebrow. "Blueberries?"

"Mister Morrison owed me for going over his teeth a few weeks back."

"Nice."

To her daughter – who already was shoving fistfuls of blueberries into her mouth – Nhung said: "Take the bowl down to your play area. I want to talk to daddy."

Kylie jumped down from her chair without a word and ran off smiling a blueberry smile, bowl in her hands.

"Mother will be over in thirty minutes," she said.

George made a pistol out of his fingers, put the barrel against his temple, and blew the wet sound of flatulence.

"Just be thankful she's not living here."

"She's never going to live with us."

"In Vietnam—"

"We're not in Vietnam."

Nhung started playing with her teacup, distracted.

"I'm sorry babe. It's a small place and your mother and I just don't get along."

"She likes you fine. It's not that, anyway."

"Then what?"

She looked up at him. "They're upping the rent again."

"*Mother fuckers.*"

"Yeah," she said. "Mother fuckers."

They sat in silence.

She kept turning her teacup in her hands, eyes down.

"There's more?" George asked. "Okay, say what you want to say."

She looked up at him with something approaching regret. "You could get a government subsidy."

His eyes went cold. "No."

"You're entitled to it."

"No," he said, firmly.

"George."

"Nhung. How am I indigenous? I'm one-quarter black, and most people look at me and think I'm white. I never lived with my mob, I don't know the language and my tribe's elders are all long dead. So tell me – how am I indigenous?"

"Does it matter?"

He didn't bother answering that and she didn't try repeating the question.

George let out a long breath and put his hand on hers. "Maybe I could qualify for some more money. But it's imaginary money – it's all quarantined. Some bureaucrat arsehole in an office somewhere deciding where every cent goes. I never see it. They even choose the food I eat, in order to encourage a balanced diet. Like I'm a child." He touched the cool metal of the cochlear implant behind his left ear. "I take that money, the bastards will switch my geo-locater on permanently; they'll scrutinize everything I do. These people Nhung…I just can't."

"It would give us some room. Some room to breathe, George."

"Not with that money. It would suffocate me, living that way."

She gripped his hand and sighed. "I know George, I know. I'm sorry."

"Maybe I can get the union started again."

"The union?" She gave a short laugh. "Ha. What century are you from? You start a union and the only thing you'll achieve is an extended stay in a political prison."

"We fall behind in the rent we'll end up in a debtor's prison. I'm not sure I can tell the difference between the two." He paused, looking down at their hands. "I could…" He trailed off.

"Don't say it George, don't say it."

He looked up at her. "I could fight again."

She withdrew her hands from his. "I'd rather you went to jail than fight again."

"Nhung."

"No." She stood, her voice raised. She glanced over at Kylie and lowered her voice, whispering fiercely. "Never again. Never again watching a live feed of you fighting some custom-built killer while five thousand people scream for your blood. Alone in this house, six months pregnant, worrying my daughter's father was going to end up a vegetable or a cripple or *dead*." Her eyes glistened, but her mouth was firm, her voice strong. "This family is staying together. No hospital beds, no prisons, no pointless self-sacrifice. You hear me, George Duulngari?"

She stared him down. He looked away. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah."

I'll give you twenty endless years
Twenty years seven thousand nights of artillery
Seven thousand nights of artillery lulling you to sleep
Are you sleeping yet or are you still awake

The spiders burst from the dirt floor of the cavern. Each with a single eye glowing a fierce red in the centre of its back, and the terrifying *tikka takka tikka takka* of their metal legs as they rubbed against each other. The cavern was dimly lit with sensi-stones, absorbing the heat in the air and turning it into a dull, orange light. Thirty refugees, packed in against each other; thirty of them, trying their best to ignore the smell and the heat and the cries of toddlers.

Until the spiders burst from the floor. Then the screams started, first in fear, then in pain.

Trung grabbed Phuong's arm, she picked up their daughter. They didn't hesitate. They knew what the fist-sized spiders brought: agonizing death, slow and inevitable. One bite that caused a spreading necrosis of the flesh that no nano-med, no matter how powerful, could halt. The Chinese called them the Number 17 Counter-Insurgency Device. The Vietnamese living underground had another name: *Nu Hon Trung Quoc*, the Chinese Kiss.

Someone unbolted the door at the end of the cavern and families were pushing through, bowed over to avoid hitting their heads on the roof. Trung shoved people out of the way and dragged Phuong through the narrow doorway.

Beyond, a narrow, low tunnel. They ducked and ran, crablike, along the confined space. Trung barged into the back of an old man, knocking him to the ground. Phuong tried to step around him but was being shoved from behind, her sandalled foot landing squarely on the old man's thin back. He let out a grunt of air as she pushed

him into the dirt, and another as the next person stomped on him as well.

Phuong didn't look back. She clutched her daughter and ran, chest heaving, breath hot in her throat, as Trung pulled her by the arm and the person behind jammed elbows into her back. She staggered, Trung dragged her upright. Darkness and screams, desperate, pleading screams, echoing down the tunnel. And if the screams paused for a few moments, the *tikka takka tikka takka* unrelenting, right behind them.

Keep running, keep running. Her daughter didn't cry, just buried her head into Phuong's shoulder and gripped her little arms around her shoulders. Trung looked back. Fear stained his face.

They plunged onwards into the darkness of the tunnel. There was no air down here, in these catacombs they'd built. Claustrophobic, in these dead spaces they called freedom. Phuong gasped for breath, her arms ached from holding her daughter. They ran towards a thin sliver of light ahead, elbows scraping against the walls, heads banging into the ceiling. All the while, behind them the screams and the *tikka takka tikka takka*.

They tumbled into another chamber, dimly lit by sensi-stones. Three others were there, young women, chests heaving. Trung pointed his pistol back into the darkness of the tunnel and fired, two, three, four times. The *boom boom boom boom* in the confined space ear-splitting, enough to make her daughter finally cry out.

Trung slammed the door closed, throwing a bolt across it.

Phuong put down her daughter and gasped, trying to regain her breath. "There are people. Coming. You. Can't close. The door."

Trung said nothing. Instead, chest heaving, he emptied the shell casings from his pistol, brass ringing against the floor, and reloaded it. Sweat stuck Phuong's shirt to her back, her daughter whimpered, clinging on to her leg. The women in the room ignored them, moving towards another exit in the opposite wall.

"We can't close the door – people will be trying to escape."

He looked up, a sheen of sweat on his thin face. "Those spiders are attracted to warm bodies," he said, quietly. "They bite only once, then burn out their control core. So they can't be reused by insurgents."

"What are you saying?"

He clicked the cylinder for the revolver in place. "We need to keep moving. They'll dig through the earth around this door."

"What are you saying, Trung? Were you shooting at the spiders?"

Trung held her gaze. "No."

He moved to his daughter, picked her up with his free arm, and followed the women out the other door.

Phuong wiped the sweat from her eyes with the back of her hand. It was shaking. Those that shared the Trail with them – the old and the very young mainly – were back there. She reached out, laid her fingertips on the small door for a few moments, the rough grain of the iron rubbing her fingertips.

She breathed out and followed her family.

George long-poured Paddy the Greek three fingers of gin. Paddy nodded his head at the end of the pour, picked up the tumbler, and closed his eyes as he sipped his drink. His hand trembled.

George went back to cleaning tall glasses with a white cloth and staring into the flashing neon signs above the slot machines. The cyclical tunes of the slots, once an interminable distraction as he tried to take orders or simply stand for a few fleeting moments and quietly think, were now habituated into background noise. A few months working day shifts at the Blue Galah and he barely noticed them anymore.

Before noon, so the place was quiet. Just Paddy up at the bar in his regular spot, taking his third gin of the morning, and the zombies at the slots, eyes glazed as the wheels turned and turned again. Promising, but never delivering, the golden ticket to a new life. It didn't matter that they never really paid off: the patrons weren't there for the money. They were there to die the slow death of their addiction. Until the shame and the debt buried them in the dead red earth.

George was drawn from his reverie as the doors swung open and the blinding light of the morning sun split the gloom. As soon as the two

men stepped off the bottom step, George knew there'd be trouble. He could always smell a fight coming, and these two reeked.

They sauntered in wearing Xiong original suits and white-topped patent leather shoes. One of the guys was big and big everywhere. The shoulders, the arms, the thighs, the fists. He had a set of steel teeth, glinting under the neon of the slots, and a magnum-sized chin. The smaller guy was the boss, obviously. He wore black leather gloves and an air of insouciance and entitlement only the very rich can really replicate. He seemed vaguely familiar.

George straightened.

The boss man smiled at George and said something. George didn't hear it; he found himself distracted by the dazzle of the man's teeth. They seemed to glow with a blue hue in the dank underground of the bar. They sparkled, too, as though covered in diamond shavings.

"Sorry mate?" asked George.

The man said, with a simulated patience and continuing smile: "I said, your best whisky my good man." He sat down on a stool in front of George, passing his fedora to his man to hold. His man sat with his back to George, watching the barflies and the slot addicts, doing his best imitation of what a bodyguard should do in a dingy bar.

Up close, the boss man's eyes were bloodshot and he reeked of cigarettes and booze. Down from the spires no doubt, slumming it in the dugouts, looking for the raw edge of existence long since rubbed out over on the right side of the tracks.

George threw his white rag over his shoulder, grabbed a bottle from the shelf and poured two fingers of whisky into a clean tumbler. He placed the glass and the whisky in front of the man.

Blue Teeth looked at the bottle. "*This* is your best whisky?"

"It's what you came here for."

The man's faux smile wavered for a moment, before returning. "Why, I think you may be right."

The man drank the whisky in one hit, grimacing in the aftermath. He pulled a pack of Double Happiness cigarettes from the inside pocket of his jacket and tapped one halfway out with a gloved finger, then removed it with his lips. His bodyguard lit the cigarette with a silver lighter.

"Any *action* in this part of town?" asked the boss.

George shrugged, and moved back down the bar to continue wiping the glasses.

The man moved three stools down, so he was sitting in front of George again. That put him a seat away from Paddy the Greek.

"There must be some local hangout. Some little-known establishment you people frequent." He took a drag on his smoke, eyes on George. They may have been bloodshot, but something sharp sparkled in there. The man continued. "Dog fights or human fights, card games, women, opium dens, blacklegged memory pins."

George shook his head.

"No?"

"We got slot machines and cheap gin, same as every other place."

The man with blue teeth turned to Paddy the Greek and said: "What about you, champ?"

Paddy the Greek rose from his stool without a word, drink in hand, and disappeared into the dusk between the slots. For an alcoholic Paddy had great instincts.

The man poured himself another drink. "I've got to say, I'm a little disappointed. This place lacks *vitality*."

"It's eleven on a Thursday morning."

The man stared at George's hands, resting in the bar. "I've seen you before." He closed his eyes for ten long seconds. George's stomach twisted. The man would be searching his memory pin, pulling up old images, watching them against the back of his eyelids. Hard to see a way out of this one. Blue Teeth opened his eyes again. "Ah yes, George Duulngari. I watched a fight of yours, six years ago."

George said nothing, started wiping down the bar counter.

"Made a bit of money on you – a nice return on investment."

George kept wiping.

Blue Teeth took another drag on his cigarette, blowing the smoke upwards in a thick cloud. "I'm always on the lookout for good fighters."

George knew who the man was now. Dan Hancock: second cousin to one of the CEOs out

in the freezones. Practically royalty. "I don't fight anymore."

Hancock indicated the bar with his wave of his cigarette. "No. You work in some anonymous dive in the wrong end of town."

"It's an honest living."

"Compared to fighting? Not really."

"No. Compared to running fighters down to freezone three."

"Ah. So you do recognize me," Dan Hancock said. He nodded at George. "You're a hard man to read, I like that."

"You're easy. I like that."

"Really," Hancock said, and stamped out his cigarette in a nearby ashtray. "What am I thinking now?"

"You're thinking of a way to provoke me into fighting your man here," George said, indicating the bodyguard with his chin. "Test out my skills. If I win, you're going to make me an offer you think I can't refuse."

Dan Hancock raised his eyebrows. He pulled the cigarette pack out of his pocket, drew another one with his lips, eyebrows still raised. "Maybe too smart though. I like that less."

When fighting a bigger opponent, as a general rule, you'll lose. No matter what the movies say, fighting is largely a matter of physics. A difference in size can only be made up for with luck, or a far superior skill level. George was not a small man by any means, six foot tall, lean and muscular, broad shoulders, he'd fought middleweight in his time. The problem was Hancock's man was a heavyweight, upgraded. Hancock's man would inevitably have the standard combat add-ons: toughened bones, adrenalin spur, endorphin modulation, possibly nano-infused carbon joints in the shoulders, hips, knees. If this man with the lantern jaw had any idea, he should be able to crush George and easily.

But hired goons rarely had any idea. Hancock's man had turned in his chair to face George. He grinned, his steel teeth gleaming red in the backwash of neon from a Double Happiness sign over the bar.

"Oh – you're alive," George said. "I thought you were a hat stand." Then he turned to Hancock. "This meat coat hanger the best you got?"

The goon snarled and grabbed George by the collar, pulling him forward. George slammed the flat of his hand into the man's throat. The goon's eyes widened, his face went red and he staggered backwards, big hands at his neck.

Throat. Knees. Eyes.

The three most vulnerable areas. The biggest man in the world couldn't keep fighting with one of those taken out.

George leaped the bar in one smooth movement, landing lightly. The man put his fists out to block, but George kicked low with his right leg, smashing the side of the man's knee. The man wobbled, grimacing, his steel teeth flashing in the gloom. George kicked the knee again, hard. The man drew his leg up, grimacing in pain. Less than George had hoped – he'd hoped his opponent would be writhing on the stained polycrete floor by now.

They circled each other. Six feet away sat an old woman with stringy grey hair, forgotten schooner of beer in one hand, the other pressed against the large button on the slot machine. She didn't even notice them.

The man moved towards George, who manoeuvred himself away, until his back was pressed against one of the slots.

George was lucky. The man was an idiot.

The goon threw a punch hard enough to take George's head clean off. George ducked it easily, the man's hand smashed through the glassteel screen of the slot machine. The goon grunted as he pulled the bloodied mess of his fist from the slot, groaned as George punched him in the balls and went silent as he took the full force of a round kick to the temple. He fell awkwardly, head cracking hollowly on the hard floor.

George rounded on Hancock.

The boss man nodded, eyebrows up, as if to say *impressive.* He pulled another cigarette from the pack with his lips, speaking round it as he said: "This trip down below hasn't been a waste, after all. You're going to make a fine addition to my stable, George."

George's chest heaved as he brought his breathing under control. "There's two different ways for me to say no to you, Hancock. You're about to get the hard way."

"Come now. This can be lucrative for us both. No need to get ugly."

"Ugly is all it ever is," George said, squaring his shoulders. "I've worked for men like you all my life. Soft-handed, entitled, looking right through people like me, invisible, right up to the moment you want something from us."

Hancock smiled. "George, you're too sensitive. This is a business proposition, that's all. *Mutually beneficial.*"

George took a step towards him, fists clenched.

Hancock held up a hand. His grin was gone. "Listen: this is how it is going to be. We don't make a deal here, I'll go to the police and tell them you beat up my man here, unprovoked." He put a finger to the cochlear implant behind his left ear. "My memory stream will be tweaked just enough so it looks like you started the fight. Man like you would get three years for something like that." He pointed at the shattered face of the slot. "Double that for damage to private property."

George growled. "Going to be hard to look at that memory pin with it torn out of your skull."

Hancock laughed. "Can you really be that ignorant?" George's hands curled into fists as the man sneered at him and said: "My memories aren't just stored here, in my head. They're duplicated, backed up elsewhere."

George eyed the man, breathed in and out steadily. Then, for the first time since leaving home that morning, he smiled. "That's a relief."

Doubt interfered with Hancock's sneer. "How so?"

"You've backed me into a corner."

"And that's a relief?"

"Yes. Liberating. To be all out of choices. I can't see any way out of it. I can't see a single path that doesn't end with me fighting for you in freezone three."

The self-assurance returned to Hancock's face. "I said you were smart."

"Nah mate. Not so smart at all."

Hancock had a moment to register surprise as George's fist collided with his mouth, but only a moment. He sprawled against the bar, head snapping back as George followed up with a left, right, left, all to the man's mouth. Trying to bash out those blue gleaming, eternal teeth.

.....

I'm still here, sweetie, so many love tokens
Metal handcuffs to wear, sacks of sand for pillows
Punji sticks to scratch your back, fire hoses to wash your face
How do we know which gift to send each other
And for how long until we get sated

"I can fight. This is my country."

Trung reached out and held her arm, fingers on the bare skin close to her shoulder. "Yes, you can fight. Better than me. You are as brave as Dang Thuy Tram. You will need to be, to get our daughter away from here, where it is safe."

"Who knows if it is safe?"

He nodded at the landscape, the outlines of the world revealed as the burnished orange line of the sun slouched over the horizon. At the ground pockmarked with craters, and the lines of thin men and women, clasping battered AK-47s, preparing to hop into faded green military transports. At the hundreds of once-white refugee tents, flapping in the morning ocean breeze. The morning breeze, a relief against the heat, wet and suffocating, that drowned them all; the heat that caused old men and women to collapse on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and dead bodies to swell like balloons. At the horizon, where pyres of smoke stained the sky and where the bare earth, riven with gene scramblers, yielded not one grain of rice.

"This is no place for our beautiful girl," he said, gently. Their daughter stood between them, holding the hands of her parents, a small genetic fusion of their being, linking them forever.

"There has to be another way," said Phuong. Her eyes welled with tears.

"That's the price. I help Older Brother Tuan run people out of the south for a year to pay for your tickets, then six months more for mine."

"He's your friend. He should not do this."

"He's my friend, which is why I will help him. My price is half what he charges others. We have both acted properly."

Phuong was silent.

She breathed out. "Then walk with your daughter until we are to leave."

Trung nodded and picked his daughter up. He was about to walk away when Phuong said: "But you'll follow us? You promise?"

"I promise. Nothing can keep us apart," he re-

plied. But there was a sadness in his eyes as he said the words, a sadness that twisted in Phuong's chest.

Trung turned and walked out slowly along the shore to show his daughter all the boats clustered there. Smooth polycarbon or wood or pitted iron hills gleaming as the morning rays struck them. Gleaming in the morning gloom, gleaming with possibility, while the land behind remained in shadow. The breeze brought Nhung's laughter back up the hill, happy in her father's arms.

Phuong waited until they were further along the shore before slumping down on the rough earth. She plunged her fingers into the dirt, watching Trung hold his daughter. Watching them bathed in the morning light.

She covered her eyes.

Nhung looked up in surprise as George burst into the room. She was standing in the kitchen, frying some noodles on the pan. George rushed to where Kylie played on the thin carpet with her trains, her little brow creased in concentration. He picked her up and hugged her against his chest, his face pressed into her unruly mop of dark hair.

Kylie squirmed and giggled. "Are you a monster?"

George kept hugging her.

Kylie squirmed around so she could look at Nhung. "Mummy! Daddy monster is getting me."

"George – is that blood on your hands?" asked Nhung.

"Mummy! Is daddy a monster?"

Nhung stared at the scene, fearing what it meant. Knowing. She put down the noodles and walked over to them both. "No," she said and put her arms around them both. "No."

A pause, then: "Why is daddy crying?"

Nhung said nothing. George's shoulders shook.

"Mummy? Why is daddy crying?"

Nhung grabbed George's chin, raised it from his daughter's hair so he was looking at her. Something was broken, in there, behind his blurred eyes.

"They made me," he said. "They're coming."

She looked at him in silence for a few moments. "How bad?"

"Bad."

"Where will they take you?"

"The freezones. Ten years, at least, on a debtor's contract. They'll make me fight again."

She put her hand on his wet cheek, silent for a long half minute. "Then fight."

They held each other and George whispered to his daughter. Kylie stopped wriggling after a while and instead gripped her father tighter, little arms clasped around his neck. He whispered to Nhung also, forehead pressed against hers. She closed her eyes and said *you too* and *I know* and *always*.

A few minutes later the internal security communications system crackled into life and a disembodied voice echoed through all the apartments in the dugout. "Resident George Duulngari, we have a warrant for your arrest. Present yourself up top immediately, or we will enter and take you by force."

George whispered to Nhung to close the door behind him, and then, loudly into the room, he said: "I'm coming out."

It didn't matter. They fired tear gas down into the corridors. George pulled up the bottom of his shirt, covering his mouth. His eyes stung and lungs burned as he left the apartment and walked through the clouds of yellow gas, as he ascended the stairs and walked out into the baking hot, still afternoon. All around were black-masked security personnel, waiting.

There he was. Just a silhouette to them, against the gas. Just a silhouette, rising from the earth. Not a man. A silhouette.

George broke the leg of the first man that came at him. The second he struck under the chin guard of the helmet, in the throat. The third he drove into the fourth that came at him, causing the force rod of the third to discharge into the chest of the fourth.

The others, they stood back then. Hesitant, looking at each other, waiting for someone else to go in first. George laughed. The silhouette, he laughed at them all.

They shot him with pulse rifles, crackling blue lines intersecting with George's head and chest. Arcs of electricity playing over his body, his teeth. George fell to the ground in spasm, thrashing against the current coursing through his system. As he lost consciousness, his throat

choked with electricity, still he laughed.

Lastly, I'll give you a tear gas grenade
A tear gland for this modern epoch
A type of tear neither sad nor happy
Drenching my face as I wait.

—Tran Da Tu, Saigon, 1964

Phuong gave her daughter the letter. Nhung looked into her mother's face. Lined and weathered, though all emotion had been baked out by the unrelenting sun of her new country, it gave nothing away as she stood watching her daughter.

Nhung opened the envelope. It read:

Some rich prick dropped these. Get a place down in Freo. See you in ten.
Always.
Always.
George

Something rattled in the envelope. Nhung tipped the contents onto her hand. Four teeth rolled out onto her palm. Shimmering blue, perfect, each seemed to glow with its own inner light.

Nhung made fists with her hands, scrunching the letter in one hand, the teeth in the other, pressing them into her palm. She looked down at her daughter, playing with her trains again. Nearby the overturned sofa, slashed open, its stuffing pulled out. Her tomato plants had been torn from their pots, the contents of every cupboard in the kitchen emptied onto the floor.

The police had turned her apartment upside down after the case had been completed, looking for anything that could be sold off to pay for their debts. They'd taken the second-hand holounit, an ivory flute Nhung had been given when she was very young, even George's trophies. They cleaned out and closed down their bank accounts as well. But it wasn't much.

George had known what would happen. That's why he had gone to her mother with the envelope.

Kylie played in the middle of it all, oblivious.

Nhung's eyes glistened, but she did not cry. She never cried. Her mother had taught her that.

Phuong put her hand on her daughter's arm. "You will survive this," she said, in Vietnamese.

"What do you care?" said Nhung, replying in Vietnamese, emotion straining her voice. "You didn't like George. You barely talked to him all the years we were together. *You wouldn't even look at him.*"

Nhung turned from her mother, gave her her back.

Phuong mumbled something behind her.

Nhung sighed. "What?"

Phuong cleared her throat. "I said: that's not true. Oh daughter, that is so far from the truth."

Nhung turned back slowly to her mother. "What do you mean?"

Her mother never talked much, never said much more than a sentence – except if it was about food – but now the words poured out, quickly. "You won't remember your father. But he was the same as George, in so many ways. The same flawed courage. A manhood that stared inwards. And a love for you, my daughter, larger than the sun."

Phuong took a step forward and grasped her daughter's hands. She blinked slowly, and the shadow of sorrow passed over her face. "Too many memories. It hurt to see you two, and feel the weight of that memory."

Nhung was too drained to question. She just held her mother's hands for a time, before turning to Kylie. "We've got to go now, darling. Pack up your trains."

Kylie ran her train over the floor, smiling. "Where we going?"

"Our new home."

"Is daddy coming?"

"Yes," she said, the word catching in her throat. "No. Not yet. But he will. He's going to come home. I promise."

Kylie looked up. "Promise?"

"I promise. Nothing will keep us apart."

T.R. Napper is an aid worker, stay-at-home father, and writer. He is a Writers of the Future winner and his nonfiction has been widely published. He currently lives in Ha Noi, Vietnam. His website can be found at www.nappertime.com, and he can be found on twitter: @DarklingEarth. This is his third appearance in *Interzone*. 'Love Tokens' by Tran Da Tu has been reproduced with the permission of the translator, Linh Dinh.

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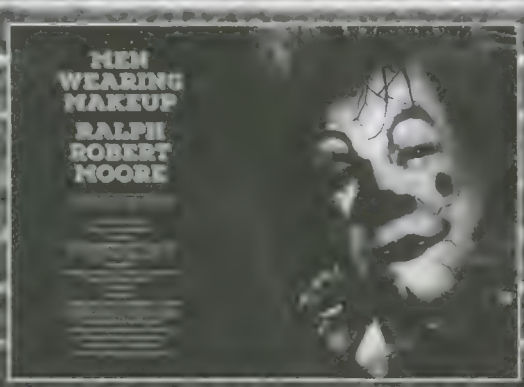

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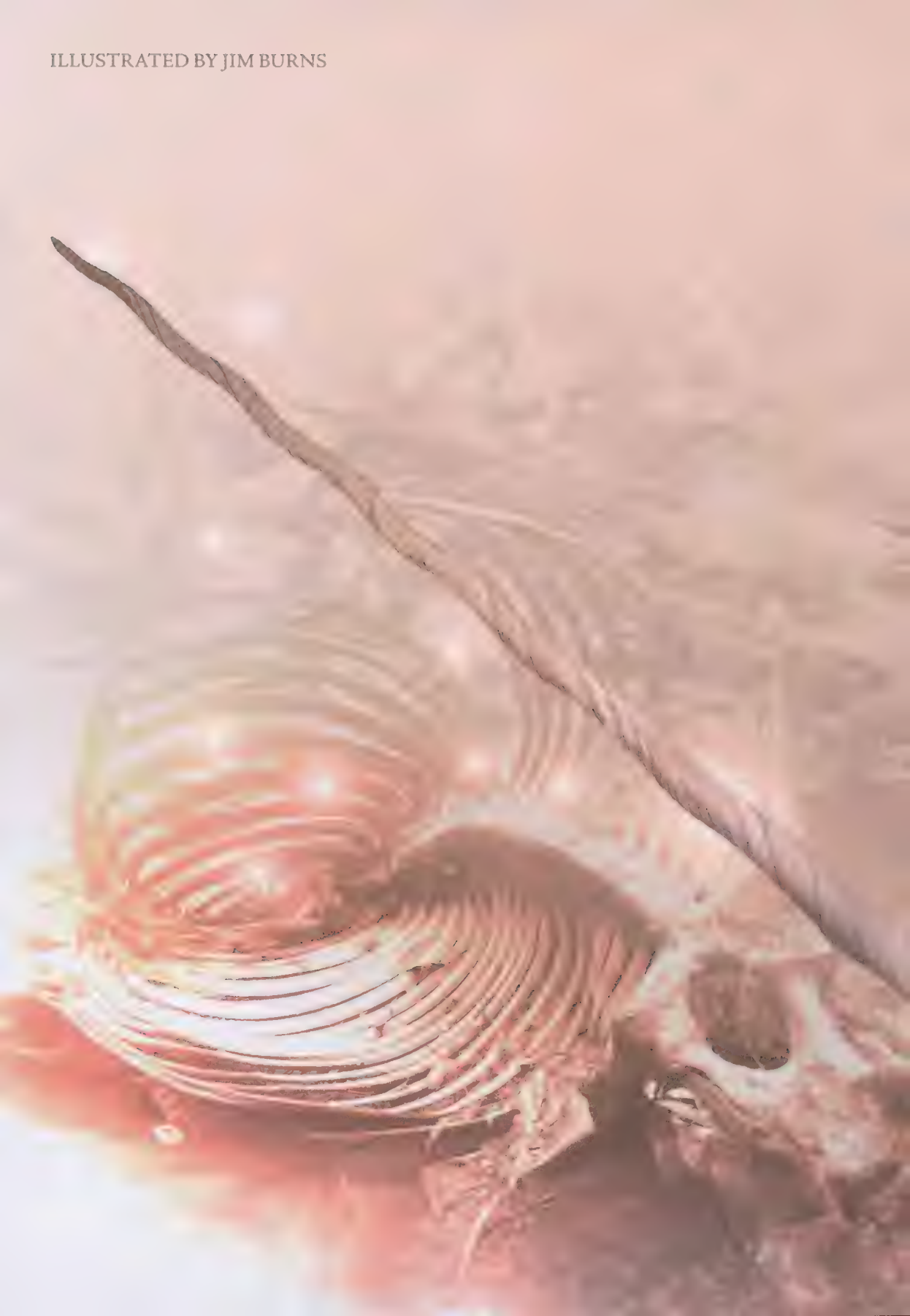


JULIE C. DAY
THE RE'EM SONG

Save me from the lion's mouth; for thou
hast heard me from the horns of the re'em
—Psalms 22:21

OF COURSE, LEAVING WAS EASY.

"The same damned people, the same damn trees, even the same damn work, all our God-fearing lives. Do you really think we would have married if there'd been even a handful to choose from?"

Jaw bones and sections of vertebrae hung from the rafters of their house. Ribs and phalanges contained in carefully sewn skins were piled outside, waiting to be shipped off. And always there were the horns calling from somewhere deep in the woods.

Harvesting unicorn bones wasn't easy work. With death, re'em bones condensed God's blessing inside their hollows, little bone-trapped bolts of His holy spirit just waiting for an opportunity to jab through a digger's flesh and find the living bone underneath. The entire Kerill Valley was charged with ghosts.

Sunnifa stood in the kitchen, while her husband, Orri, remained by the hearth in the second room of their small home. "Vulture." Sunnifa glared at her Orri's back. "Orri the bone picker," Sunnifa tried again. Orri didn't respond. He almost seemed not to hear her. Sunnifa reached up and grabbed the jar of honey from a nearby shelf, rubbing some across both hands. The honey helped hold off the scar-bent fingers, at least for a time.

Centuries ago Sunnifa's ancestors had crossed the Athlant Ocean in their longboats, carrying their Bibles and their shiny new faith, determined to track down Daniel's iron-toothed monster and the rest of God's magical beasts. Fools, every single one of them.

Sunnifa reached for a second bottle, then grimaced. They were out of lavender oil. Again. "Who'd you lend the oil to this time?"

"One of Dora's crew hit an old cache while he was still ungloved."

"Who the hell trenches ungloved?" Sunnifa pressed her thumb deep into her left palm, trying to ease the aching burn. "How bad was it?"

"Cut marks reached as far as his chest." Orri finally turned and looked at Sunnifa. The dark skin of his arms and face was splattered with mud from the day's excavations. "It was one of those Sturluson kids. Dora only took him on because of what happened last winter."

"Orri." The word was almost a sigh.

"I'll track some oil down tomorrow, all right?"

Sunnifa felt her anger spiking. "God's earthly paradise, my scarred ass."

Orri took two steps toward Sunnifa and the kitchen, then stopped. He looked sad – and angry. "What do you want me to say? I like it here? I don't want to leave?"

"I don't care what you say." The words were out almost before she realized she'd thought them.

"I know." And then Orri was walking to the hearth, pulling on his now-warmed boots. A few steps later and he stood next to the door.

It wasn't just Sunnifa. Orri was leaving, as well. Leaving Sunnifa anyway, if not the Kerill Valley.

THE PEOPLE MIGHT call it God's magic, but re'em skeletons were also central to the nation of Norumbega's economy. New farm land, stone bridges and walls did best with a few skeletal remains buried beneath them. Man-formed items, like bricks and clay pots, preferred actual blood.

More than fifty years ago, the knifemen of the northern Kerill Valley had culled the wild re'em herds into oblivion. Farmers further south now provided the necessary bone-and-blood wares. Didn't matter. Valley children still learned 'The Knifeman's Song' along with their first nursery rhymes.

Nine screaming horns cry out beneath the hunter's moon,
Calling for our devil blood.
Nine to call the live ones home.
We'll drain them dry. Render the flesh.
We'll cover the world in magic.

THE CITY OF Burne was a good two week's journey. Sunnifa paid the wagon driver an entire basketful of ribs. No horns, though. Sunnifa didn't want her sprint to freedom accompanied by the wail of a Valley ghost, following its disinterred horn south.

"Don't find too many of your kind heading south," the driver said, nodding toward the bone burns that ran along Sunnifa's hands and arms. Similar scars on Sunnifa's neck were hidden by her high-collared shirt, the result of a childhood dare gone wrong and a tumble into an open grave.

"Aren't that many of us left," Sunnifa said non-committally as she clambered up onto the running board. More than the man, it was the two horses that held her interest. The valley's remaining re'em – the dead ones – didn't take to their un-horned brethren. Horses weren't allowed in Kerill. Instead, valley families carried their goods in shoulder baskets over the South Lancing Trail and into the nearby town of Gherl.

Sunnifa paid the driver enough bone money to take her all the way to Burne. Beyond that she had no idea. A city near the sea sounded like the opposite of everything she had left behind. It sounded like Heaven.

TAPESTRIES HUNG ON either side of the city's open gates. Embroidered unicorns, ghost-white, sat inside carefully sewn corals. Their heads rested on the laps of golden-haired girls wearing long blue-green dresses.

"You ain't that different, eh?" the wagon driver called back, nodding his head toward the embroidery. It was the first thing he'd said to Sunnifa in hours. Almost two weeks travel hadn't made them friends.

Sunnifa knew the wagon driver wasn't comparing her to the girls. Sunnifa's hair was imaginary-unicorn-white, not blonde. Her pale skin was sliced by bone-burns. Even if that hadn't been true, her winter-sky eyes were nothing like those of the untroubled, tapestry virgins.

"Your people live in the Warrens, up toward the knackeryards," the driver said, tossing Sunnifa's carpetbag to the ground. He'd stopped his horses at the edge of a large square not far from the city gates.

"Knackeryards?"

"The slaughterhouses where they slice up all that magic flesh."

"Ah."

The noise of the market was like nothing Sunnifa had ever heard before. There were more people in this one square than in the entire Kerill Valley. Stalls were piled high with carrots and turnips, grown in bone-laced soil, of course. Hooks hung with legs of mutton and half-carcasses of pig. Really, the square wasn't that different from smaller town markets. If you didn't look too closely. Brickmakers' apprentices stood next to stacks of red-tinged bricks while potters' boys hovered nearby ready to sell their own reddish-clay jugs and bowls. Fresh unicorn blood. Burne's crowded market was soaked in it.

"You need to head back to the Warrens," the driver repeated, more slowly, as though unsure Sunnifa had understood him the first time. He had brown hair and brown eyes, no smile. He nodded his head toward a cobbled street that led off the square, one of the few not made of those reddish bricks. "Oreste Street."

Sunnifa could see fresh bones hanging from the street's archway. Some of the bones still had dried bits of cartilage clinging to them.

"Right," Sunnifa said. "The Warrens."

"Welcome to Burne," the driver said, already turning back to his horses.

Sunnifa held tight to her bag as the shoppers and the stall workers swirled around her. Honey-blond hair. Brown hair. Reddish-ginger hair. Freckles. She'd seen freckles before, but never in such profusion. Hair kinked like Orri's but longer, braided down the back. People tall and short and everything in between. Broad-chested men with over-sized bellies. Little women with honey-colored skin.

So many of them. And there seemed to be a pattern to their groupings. That she hadn't expected. The petite, honey women wore wrapped headcloths that covered all their hair. They stirred steaming kettles, their faces flushed from the heat as they offered "laced tea" to passersby. Blood-laced tea.

Orri's granny used to talk about the strange infections that could spread across un-blooded land. The dead were always trying to claim back a world over-filled with humanity. God's bones and blood protected both the land and the people of Norumbega. And the city's domesticated re'em were at the center of all that commerce.

Sunnifa took a slow breath and started toward a handful of men standing at the edge of Oreste Street. Her people. Was that who these pale strangers were?

One of the men nodded his head in Sunnifa's direction. "Little sister," he called out.

"Hello." The knackerman smiled as he bent his head to look Sunnifa in the eyes. He reminded Sunnifa of her father: tall, with the same pale

eyes and fish-belly skin Mama used to joke about. But it was the tilt of the man's lips, something about the line of his jaw and those creases along his eyelids that did it. No bone burns of course. That was one difference.

Sunnifa's unicorn-white hair and the smiling man were enough to get her an apprenticeship in one of Burne's slaughterhouses. The man was like Sunnifa's father in that way as well, sharing the family trade.

WHEN SUNNIFA AND Orri were still too young to work the crews, Orri's granny placated them with stories.

"A wild re'em is a vengeful creature," she would start, settling back into her wooden chair. "That's what the knifemen counted on."

Like most children back then, Orri's granny had been a Beater. During the hunt, her stick smashed through the forest undergrowth, driving the re'em herds toward the nine singing horns.

"Nine threaded trees and nine dead re'em horns," Granny explained, stroking Sunnifa's white-blonde hair. "It's important to get these things right."

A re'em hunt was a valley-wide affair. The Blooded Lure, a knifeman with at least one kill, ran just ahead of the herd, making sure the re'em knew their killers were close at hand.

"I'd hate to be that guy," Orri said, his dark eyes solemn.

"But he was the most important person of all. He kept the re'em focused."

The unicorns all looked the same as they thundered forward: red eyes and dun-colored hair. Their black cloven hooves matched the darkness of their spiraling horns. Their rage: they were the same in that way as well, each one of them just about bursting with it.

Once the herd of wild re'em reached the clearing, the trip lines brought them down and the knifemen descended.

CHANGE TAKES TIME. Her husband's name, Orri, was no more than a ghost breath, a whisper Sunnifa chose to ignore.

For six seasons Sunnifa lived far from the Kerill Valley's white pines and hemlocks, far from the bone-notes that rose from beneath its tamped-down earth. In that sixth season, though, the city's silence finally drove her home. Burne had not a single ghost.

Sunnifa rode a wagon north to Gherl, walking the last few miles along the South Lancing Trail. A chill wind seemed to follow her to the clearing where their little house still stood, the door closed, smoke rising from the chimney.

"Orri?" Sunnifa called.

"What—" Orri opened the door, but got no further.

The broad curve of his lips hadn't changed, though his hair was much shorter than Sunnifa remembered; she could see the contours of his skull beneath the thin layer of fuzz. Dark lashes so unlike Sunnifa's own.

"Hi. Orri… I…"

He stood aside, silently gesturing her into the house.

Their table still rested next to the stove. Jars of honey and lavender oil sat on the kitchen shelf. There were new things as well: open bottles and a collection of yellowed teeth, artifacts of some dig, strewn across the table's surface. Beer and not much else seemed to be on the menu.

"Don't worry," Orri said. He stood a little closer than Sunnifa would have liked. "You can stay."

And that seemed to be it.

When Sunnifa left, Orri had held tight to his silence, hurt, it seemed to her, but nothing more. Now the silence felt more like its own creature, sharp and feral.

THREE WEEKS OF close-to-silence.

"Why don't you come out and say hello to Robert and Isibel?" Orri said.

"It's dark in here. Can't you at least keep the fire going?" Orri said.

"Varr is looking for some help down at the mill," Orri said.

While Orri and the crew worked yet another re'em grave, Sunnifa sat in their house and worked on not moving. Eventually some other plan would occur to her.

Each night Sunnifa slept in their old loft bed, while Orri sat at the kitchen table with his bits of dead re'em. Touching – that tangle of legs and glide of sweat against flesh – wasn't part of

this new world. Other night-sounds emerged instead.

A clatter of teeth scattering across a table, a quick scuffing of enamel on wood. Instead of sleep, Orri spent his nights tossing re'em teeth. From the loft, Sunnifa could hear the chink of glass as yet another empty beer bottle was set against the floor.

The memory of their old life was like a ghost, haunting both of them into silence.

JUST A FINGER of moonlight slipped through the living room's eastern window. Sunnifa could hear the clatter of the gate opening, followed by the sound of voices.

"Make sure you check the stitching on that one."

"Haul's about ready to go over the mountain. Can we at least get Sunnifa to help carry the baskets?"

"What the hell does she do all day anyway?" That last voice was Cousin Isibel. Isibel might be only five years older than Sunnifa, but with that spider web of bone-burns across both cheeks and her shock of coarse white hair, it seemed more like decades.

"Gone over a year and now she just sits in that house eating your food," Isibel continued in her low, gravelly tones. "Bet you're not even fucking her."

"Enough!" Orri snapped.

"Isibel, just leave it," someone else said.

After that there were minutes of blessed silence before the yard filled with the sounds of the crew calling their goodbyes.

Now came the moment when Orri would open the door and find her still sitting in the wooden chair.

"I need your help," shadow Orri said from the doorway.

"Help?" Sunnifa pressed her back more firmly into the wooden chair.

"Robert forgot the horns. We just finished the inventory. They aren't here."

"Ah."

"I told him the two of us would take care of it." Orri started across the room toward Sunnifa.

"Why? Tell him you changed your mind."

"Too late. He's already left." Orri's voice seemed calm, but then there was that set of his eyes, his lips – something.

"Can't we just go to bed and deal with it tomorrow?" Sunnifa said, wishing almost immediately she'd left the words unspoken. The smile on Orri's face wasn't pretty.

"I didn't think we did that anymore."

THE WORLD OUTSIDE is a strange and unbalanced place; that's what Sunnifa should have told Orri when she walked back over the mountain, bone-weary from the hike home. Instead, she and Orri barely spoke. Sure she'd flown away, but she'd also returned to Orri and the valley and all those burial mounds. Returned to their valley of ghosts. Somehow, that felt like it should count for something.

"I'm not going," Sunnifa said while Orri slipped on the pack he'd set near the door.

"I mean it, Orri," she said as he filled one of the smaller lanterns with kerosene.

"No choice. Hunter's moon tonight." Orri stood over Sunnifa, hands at her elbows, pulling her up and out of the chair. "The crew and I have been working the area near the Eslot River."

"An old horn site? God damn it, Orri." Older remains were the worst, overflowing with holy magic. They also paid the most cash.

"I needed the money." Orri turned and opened the blanket chest next to Granny's chair, pulling the top blanket aside. A leather sheath, hand-sewn with rough stitches. A handle worn smooth with use. A knifeman's blade. Orri's great grandfather had used that knife during the last of the re'em hunts – Orri was bringing it with him.

"Orri."

"Horns and moonlight, dearest. We might actually get lucky. You'll have to carry this," he added, handing Sunnifa the knife. "Not exactly my skill."

Sunnifa wasn't sure how it happened, but she somehow found herself following Orri through the front door and out into the night, the weight of the knifeman's blade hanging from her waist.

BURIED, THE FOREST'S horns sounded like a muted prayer. Tonight though, the horns left out by Orri's crew laid bare the lie. Loud, frenzied cries filled the wood.

"Exactly how many horns are we talking about?" Sunnifa asked as she ducked under yet another tree branch.

"Nine."

"Nine—"

"*Nine screaming horns cry out beneath the hunter's moon,*" Orri recited. He tilted his head up to the sky and laughed. "Don't worry, Sunnifa. You know there's not many wild re'em left, none in this valley. We'll probably just prick ourselves with the sewing needles."

Sunnifa trusted Orri. At least she'd trusted him enough to come back home after more than a year in the city. Maybe Orri hadn't meant to mix the horns with moonlight. The last few weeks had been…difficult.

Still, she didn't quite dare reach for Orri's hand. "I'm cold," she said instead.

Orri paused, pulled a woolen scarf from one of his pockets, and reached for Sunnifa.

She couldn't help herself. She flinched.

"Since when don't you like to be touched," Orri muttered, tightening the edges of the scarf so that no gaps remained. "Sunnifa." He paused. "I want you to stay."

Orri's dark skin and hair stood out against an even darker sky. His face, though, was still hidden in shadow. Didn't matter. Sunnifa knew exactly what he looked like. She used to get high on the smell of him. The tang of salt she'd find along his collarbone. The bitter green that filled the space between his thumb and palm.

Sometimes she'd drag him atop one of those rough-grassed mounds with its hidden bones.

"I like the feel of all those eyes watching," she'd whisper as he slipped his hands beneath the band of her skirt, fingers searching lower. Of course, she was already wet.

The clothes didn't last long. Neither did the standing, at least on Sunnifa's part. Her lips ran along the inner muscles of his thighs, biting just enough to make him flinch. Her tongue moved as well, waiting for that long inhalation before she lowered herself into the dark hairs between his legs. Untainted and earthy, that was another scent she remembered. The taste that followed was just the same.

"The city was warmer," Sunnifa said, feeling the rough wool against her neck, the heat of Orri's body. "Something about those ocean currents." She paused. "It's dark, Orri."

"Don't really need much light to see what I've got to show you."

Did he really want to screw while those nine horns listened in?

Orri sighed. "I brought the lamp, Sunnifa. It was a joke."

"Orri?"

"Um."

"Light the damn lantern."

"Fine. Right." He pulled the pack off, unearthed the lantern, carefully lit the wick.

"We had to hack through one of the old, overgrown trails to find this site. Robert's idea," Orri said as he started forward, holding the lantern in one hand.

"Robert is full of stupid ideas. You know that."

"He's not the only one."

Orri took the lead. Somewhere close by, Sunnifa heard a splash as a rock or stick fell into a puddle. Then another cascade of dirt and rocks as she and Orri stumbled down a slight incline. It almost felt like something was following them.

Up ahead, Sunnifa could see Orri's hand gripping the lantern. Those hands used to raise Sunnifa up and onto him, hold her still, his eyes daring her to move first.

THE DIG SITE. Star chips clung overhead along with that orange-yellow hunter's moon, while the shadows of wild grasses wavered atop the old burial mound. None of it unexpected. Still, the re'em bones lying open to the air made Sunnifa shiver. She hadn't seen earth-cleansed skeletons in over a year.

The lantern sat on a flat stretch of ground next to the discarded backpack. Orri's hands held a coil of rope. He'd brought trip lines. Of course he had. The sound that had followed them all the way to the site was like hooves, not branches.

"It was strange without you here. Bad strange," Orri said. He dragged one end of the rope to a nearby hemlock and tied it a foot above the ground. After securing the line, he moved on, passing a number of young evergreens before finally knotting the rope to an older white pine.

Sunnifa heard a branch crack somewhere off to their left. "You really think trip lines and bone

magic are going to solve all this?" Sunnifa gestured between the two of them.

"Something has to."

Sunnifa watched silently as Orri picked his way between seven more trees. In the end, the clearing was bisected by a nine-sided figure made entirely of rope, a knifeman's line. Sunnifa's line. She was the one carrying the blade.

"Orri, there aren't any wild re'em left in the valley."

"Maybe. How did you manage anyway? In the city?" Orri asked just as though he hadn't been carrying that question for the last three weeks. "You didn't leave with much."

"A friend found me a job."

"Friend?"

The nine unearthed horns kicked up then; their frenzied screams charging even higher.

"A LOST LITTLE sister," the knackermen called Sunnifa when she first appeared in their midst.

Her re'em-burned arms made her an oddity. Re'em teeth are like a wolf's, meant for tearing. Burne's knackermen had different marks. Sunnifa's knackerman, Jakob, had a line of angry flesh, pointed scars that ran from his neck down below the cut of his shirt.

The re'ems bled red. That's what Sunnifa didn't tell Orri. That first re'em's blood sprayed out from his throat and against his brown hair while strangers stood and watched.

Even with the ropes, the re'em pulled back as she pressed the knife down. His eyes rolled upward and his lips stretched black against his teeth.

"Watch where you're cutting," the foreman called out. "Trust the ropes." He stood just a few feet away on the other side of the stall. Jakob stood next to him. One of Jakob's boots pressed against the side of the pen, while his belly strained against his canvas apron.

Jakob had taught Sunnifa well. After the herd was led up Oreste Street and into the pens, Sunnifa tied the re'em's halter rope to the metal pins. She ignored the looks of the meat tenders who waited nearby. She knew what she was getting into. Flesh couldn't be any worse than a seemingly endless dirge of ghosts.

Before coming to the city, Sunnifa had collected ghost bones and wrapped them tight. She'd laid the skeletons out as though the flesh still held the frame together, then sewn the packages with dried gut.

Blood terror, though, had never entered into it. Sunnifa, it turned out, hadn't understood at all.

After she finished with the knife, she stepped back from the animal's fallen body and with shaking hands held the collecting bowl beneath the gaping wound. The blood of the re'em pooled dark red against the wood while a couple of apprentices, younger than her, shifted the corpse, making sure the animal didn't bleed onto the slaughteryard's cobblestones. Animals, they called the re'em. Nothing but bits of slaughtered flesh to soak the floorboards of newly built homes.

It took Sunnifa six seasons to figure it out. Six seasons before she started her journey home. Family requires sacrifice. Family requires ghosts.

SUNNIFA FELT ORRI'S hand twining with hers as they faced the forest. The dig site's nine horns no longer screamed. Instead, they made a soft moaning sound, each one adjusting its pitch to fit with the others.

"Malcolm's got a line on a collector down the coast who likes the older stuff," Orri said. He glanced at Sunnifa. "Just north of where you were. Perhaps you can help negotiate the price."

"I didn't really make it much past the city."

"Mm." Orri sounded distracted. "You really should unsheath the knife."

Sunnifa could feel his body tense as he tracked the sound of the cracking branches moving closer.

The nine horns' song shifted again, close to melancholy.

In the city, the knackers punched holes through the fresh horns: one or two ragged holes for the whistles, more precise cuts for the reed-and-pipe musicians. On Sundays, when she wasn't at work, Sunnifa would listen to a man on the edge of Caprin Square play two aulos flutes. Both of his hands moved along the dark horns as he adjusted his fingering. Those flutes always put her in mind of the newly dead re'em she'd left back in the knackeryard.

"Why can't you valley folk leave the old things

buried?" Jakob had asked, just as though unearthed bones weren't spread across his precious city, holding up the city's outer walls.

"It's the work," she replied, not revealing a newly discovered thought: ripened in her forest at least the bones learned to sing their own melodies.

The hunter's moon shone down into the clearing as Orri's hand gripped Sunnifa's. There was a gust of wind, and then the song of the nine horns was echoed by something nearby, just on the other side of the tree line.

Leaves rustled and a few branches snapped against each other. Sunnifa could see Orri's face clearly in the lamplight. He was watching her. "Sunnifa, it's time."

There were many things Sunnifa didn't tell Orri about the city. The early morning echo of hooves on cobblestones. The cries of her knackerman as they made love on his thin, straw-filled mattress. The look in the visitors' eyes as they watched the slaughter.

One more fact she didn't share: the men who looked like Orri were tired, their faces like masks as they pushed those handcarts about town.

Without ghosts, the city was a lonely place.

Sunnifa heard the creaking of tree limbs as something large pushed its way through the branches and on toward the dig site. Then a snorting breath.

"Orri, did you hear that?"

"Yes."

"I'm not cutting anything, Orri Flom." Even to herself, her voice sounded weak. "I'm serious," Sunnifa continued when Orri didn't respond.

She bent down, placing the old knifeman's blade next to the interwoven trip lines, then took a deep breath. "Do you hear me?" she yelled out toward the trees. "It's enough already." Her voice barely quavered. Her hands didn't shake at all. She'd returned from the city. There was no way she was going to recreate it here in these woods.

"Sunnifa—"

"No," Sunnifa repeated, not giving Orri a chance to finish. "Just no."

From beyond the old white pine and its line of rope, a horn appeared, spiraling and black. The creature that followed was covered in brown hair. His red-rimmed eyes glanced from Sunnifa to the knife now lying on the ground, and then he snorted, a sharp blast of air, and started to pick his way over the first of Orri's newly strung lines.

Sunnifa could feel Orri's hand tightening as the re'em bent his horn to a pile of unearthed skins. The re'em tossed his head up, pawed at

TTA NOVELLAS

the hides with his front hooves. The edges of his teeth were now less than two feet away.

Sunnifa smelled the re'em's fetid breath, felt a spray of saliva as the re'em's hooves crashed down against Orri's trip lines. And then a scream rose from the re'em's throat, and still he didn't touch her. And she did not move. Did not move, and did not let go of Orri at her side.

"We could—" Orri started to say. The lantern lay on its side, the burning wick knocked out sometime during the re'em's frenzy. The re'em's attention had moved to the wood-handled knife resting less than a foot in front of them.

"Shh, Orri. I trust you." And then there was a sharp inhalation, her only sign of fear, as the re'em rose up on its hind legs. She should push Orri aside, behind her, do something. But the re'em's legs were already crashing down before the thought was even complete. Once. Twice. *Crack*. Hoof against metal and wood. And still the re'em didn't touch them. Instead, the shattered knife lay in pieces, now nothing more than a ghost knife.

And the nine horns, they had stopped their singing.

"Please," Sunnifa whispered. "I am so, so sorry." Broken. Afraid. Unable to say any of it.

"Sunnifa," Orri said, thinking other unknowable words. Whatever this was, it wasn't as simple as gentle forgiveness.

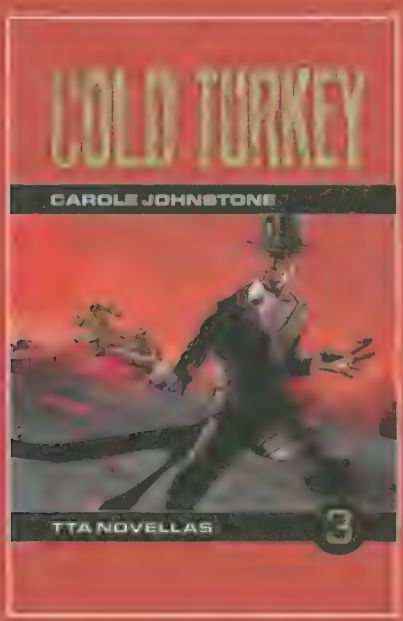
The re'em showed his teeth one last time before he backed away from the clearing.

And then Orri and Sunnifa were alone, hands still intertwined as they listened to the moan of the wind moving through the trees.

Burne, Orri used to say, was nothing like their valley.

In the Kerill Valley the trees spread wider than any town and the mountains rise high enough to obscure everything to the south. The people have no need of jellied blood and freshly-redded bricks. They no longer need to bury anything beneath the ground. In the Kerill Valley they welcome the ghosts as family.

Julie C. Day's fiction has appeared previously in *Interzone*, as well as *Electric Velocipede* and *A cappella Zoo*'s best-of. Born in Darlington, she has hazy memories of catching bees with jam-sweetened water, battery-powered fans from an indoor market, and a matching set of red vinyl armchairs where she hid from both the monsters and the television screen. Julie now lives in western Massachusetts. Some of her favourite things include gummy candies, loose teas, standing desks, and the inescapable sun of the Texas high desert. You can find Julie on Twitter @thisjulieday or through her website at www.stillwingingit.com.



All Raym wants to do is give up smoking. So why is his entire life falling apart? Why are new mistakes and old terrors conspiring against him? Why is he being plagued by the very worst spectre from his childhood? And why does giving up suddenly - horrifyingly - feel much, much more like giving in?

"Darkly funny, assuredly written, and deliciously creepy. It's also the best giving up smoking manual I've read" SARAH PINBOROUGH

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doors

BONNIE JO STUFFLEBEAM

It had been three months since I'd taken my brother anywhere. The last place we'd gone together was our mother's funeral. Since then Zack had been difficult, more so than usual, refusing to put on his shoes, shushing me when I asked him to do his chores, even screaming and pounding his fists when it was time to drive him to the recycling facility where he sorted paper as part of a program for developmentally disabled adults.

But he had agreed to visit the county fair, though in the car on the way he had bruised his knuckles knocking on the window glass, an old habit Mom and I thought we'd broken him of.

At the fair, we walked down aisles of blue-and-white striped tents that sold fried Twinkies and Dr Pepper, Texas turkey legs and popcorn balls. Zack demanded it all; the whole night he'd been signing the first letters of every food item we passed. I remembered why I'd put off an outing. Fun was exhausting, especially with a brother who wanted so much and didn't understand that he couldn't have it. Between school and the stack of bills at home, I could barely afford the fair tickets. The income from Zack's job only paid enough to cover gas to get him to work and back.

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

The word "no" always sets Zack off, so I didn't say it when he asked for giant sugar cookies and lemonade and funnel cake. Instead I walked in front of him, leading him through throngs of people, searching out booths with those magical words on display: complimentary, FREE. Thus far I'd found a magnet for a car rental agency, a blue balloon, a plastic water bottle which featured the portrait of a cartoon cowboy, four pens and a dozen flyers, all of which Zack would cherish as much as his photo collection.

In the background, the midway's steel roller coasters quaked like giants. The musk of barn animals drifted from the livestock pens near the rodeo hall. These were two places I wouldn't take him. If I did – as he begged me to, his non-signing hand pointed permanently toward them – we would never leave. I also avoided any booths which might remind me of what I could no longer accomplish, with Zack to take care of; the local travel agent's booth was hardest to avoid, with its posters depicting far off places, monuments and museums I would never visit.

Instead I followed a series of arrowed signposts with a word nearly as good as FREE: $1 Tours, in bold orange marker. They guided us to a circular purple building which seemed to be a modified Starship 2000, a ride that Zack and I had ridden often as children, when I was just his sister and not his caretaker; the UFO-shaped structure contained about two dozen pads, each as tall as a person, which everyone would lie against. The conductor in the middle would fiddle with his levers, start the carnival music, and the ride would spin around his command station. The centrifugal force would push us up to the ceiling and pin us to the walls, pull our grins wide like grotesque masks. The tour building was the same eggplant purple, but the lighted sign that stretched across its roof proclaimed a different name: The Bender. A ramp led to a door which led inside. At the gate stood a woman all in black despite the atrocious heat, one of the handmade signs in her manicured grip. Sweat shone on her bare arms, and the curve of her long fingers folded around the sharp of the sign's edges made my stomach flutter. Two more women in black leaned against the wall.

"What is this?" I asked, an excuse to hear her speak. Zack waved to the woman. He'd always been a bit of a ladies' man.

"This is the Super Spectacular Space Bender," she said. She had a strange accent, unlike any I had ever heard. "The main hub for this Multiverse, designed to take you through space and beyond!"

I smiled. My palms were sweating. It had been a while since I'd spoken to a beautiful girl. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as Zack made his way to one of the other women and stuck out his hand. She shook it.

"Oh really?" I said. "How do you manage that?"

"Tours are only a dollar. Questions will be answered at the end, though we make no guarantee as to truths, or satisfactions, or even that the questions answered will be the questions you requested."

In my wallet I had exactly five dollar bills. I handed her two – her fingers brushed mine as she took them – and called to Zack. When he wouldn't come, the woman he'd shaken hands with took his arm. People were always doing that, helping. Sometimes they asked if I needed it first. Always, I wanted to say, I need more help than you can give. Zack followed the woman up the ramp and into the Super Spectacular Space Bender. I could think of nothing else to say, so I followed him.

Inside, the Bender was shaped like a giant donut, a thin hall stretched around what must have once been the circular control room in the middle, now closed off with a wall of its own. I only knew it was still there because of the single arched door to my right. The size of the hall was impossible. It seemed to stretch farther inward than the outside suggested, but I chalked the optical illusion up to the red-and-white striped circus tent wallpaper, which made me dizzy. The pads that lined the Starship 2000 were gone. Instead, rectangular steel doors obscured the wall to my left, no more than two feet between each, the door we'd come through lost in the repetition. The Bender smelled like sugar and sweaty children. I glanced down at the floor. It was transparent, though the only thing visible through it was the concrete platform on which The Bender stood. Kernels of popcorn had been smashed into the glass.

"Look up," the woman who'd been holding the sign whispered into my ear, her breath hot. I did as she asked. The ceiling too was glass, and through it stars gleamed as if the light pollution of the fair didn't exist.

"I know, right?" the woman said. She maneuvered her way to the front of the small crowd of five, my brother and I included, and began to shout. "Ladies and gents, welcome! I would like to entreat all of you to wander these halls. Please do look in the windows of any doors you find, for as you see there are many doors, and please feel free to speculate on the nature of what you see, though I can assure you, you will be wrong. But you must not open any door, no matter what you see inside. Many have been lost to the doors." Her words echoed through the vast hallway.

I didn't see Zack or the woman he had been talking to; they'd managed to slip away down the hall.

My sneakers squeaked against the glass floor as I searched for them. When I still could see only darkness ahead, no sign of my brother, I leaned over to peer through a round porthole window in one of the doors that should have led back outside. I couldn't quite believe what was behind it. Men and women in suits stood around with cocktails in their hands. Off to the only corner of the room I could see, ravenous party guests surrounded a table of hors d'oeuvres.

But the room couldn't exist. There wasn't enough space for a large party room; there wasn't space for any room.

"What the?" I said out loud. But before my question could be answered, I spotted Zack walking through the crowd behind the window, holding a plate of cakes. Damn it, I thought. That's what I get for being distracted. I tried the knob. To my surprise, it turned. I entered the room and shut the door behind me.

I shuffled through the crowd. I thought I saw Zack's shoulder, but when I touched it, the man who turned to face me wasn't him. I darted about, searching, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Have you seen my brother?" I asked people. "Have you seen a guy with Down's Syndrome? Doesn't talk?"

One woman nodded, pointed. I followed her lead. The room was too big, and I didn't understand how Zack could move so quickly; normally he was slow, always glancing back as he walked, double- then triple-checking, like a tic. A glitch in the Matrix, our father once called it, before he packed up and left one day, at Mom's request, promising to return once she had changed her mind. We were younger. His leaving didn't mean I would be saddled with all the responsibility of a parent. We still had Mom back then.

For a moment, and I swear it was brief, I stopped. I didn't want to find him. I thought about what the woman had said – *lost through the doors* – and it sounded like a way out. I could save all my money, see the world like I'd always planned.

But then I remembered my *brother*, how no one here would know his name. I kept on.

Finally I glimpsed what appeared to be the back of his dark mop of hair near the far wall. I hurried to him and placed my hand on his shoulder. As I did I realized it was too high to be Zack's shoulder, and then the man turned.

It was our father.

Wrinkles bordered his eyes, and his hair was white and gray. We had never gotten to see him that way. The couple he'd been talking to went on talking, so he and I were left staring at one another. My father's lips pursed tight. In his hand he held a glass of amber liquor.

"What are you doing here, Nikki?" he asked.

"Why are you here?" I said, stumbling over words.

He rolled his eyes. "That's a stupid question if ever I heard one. I'm not allowed to have a party in my own apartment? Are you the party police now?"

"You're not gone," I said.

"Oh, for God's sake. You really are your mother's daughter. So dramatic." He shrugged my hand off his shoulder. "Did you come to apologize?"

Suddenly I didn't care why or how he was back, or what this life was behind the door. I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him tight. The liquor sloshed in the glass and wet a spot on my shirt, cold through the cotton.

"It's been so long," I said.

"Don't cry. Please, don't cry. You don't have to say it," he said.

"Zack!" I said. "Where is he?"

My father scowled. "In his room, I hope. I asked him to stay there. He was getting belligerent, upset at all these people, I suspect."

"You did? But wasn't he happy to see you?"

"For God's sake. If you want to raise him, go right ahead."

As if it had all been solved – all questions answered, all apologies for invented crimes assuaged – our father stormed into the crowd. I decided to seek out Zack. At least I could judge the situation by Zack's reaction.

I went down the first hall I reached, trying each door I passed. The first was a bathroom, occupied. The second a closet. Zack's was the third. I found him on the bed with his plate of cake beside him, though he wasn't eating. Instead he peered down at the floor, shaking his head, one finger twisting in the air as if he were trying to point but couldn't quite make the fingers work right. His common expression of anger.

"Hey buddy," I said as I sat beside him. "How's that cake?"

He didn't look up right away, but when he did, I realized that the area around his eye was bruised black. Immediately my hands went to touch it, to make sure it was real, but he jerked away.

"Who did this to you?" I asked.

He grunted. He wouldn't know how to answer; descriptions of people beyond *girl* and *boy* and *hat* were difficult for him.

"Did you see Dad?" I asked, hoping to calm him. As soon as *Dad* escaped my mouth, he was off, screaming, shrill and violent, as he slapped his hands against his thighs. At first I chalked this reaction up to Dad's being back, which was confusing even for me.

Then I remembered that I'd passed beyond the door. The words had been right there, in that woman's mouth. *The main hub for this Multiverse, designed to take you through space and beyond!* If that meant what I thought it could mean – I'd read about the multiverse once, freshman year, a time of mind-altering trips down strange ideas lane – then Zack and I might have gone through a door into a place where our father had never disappeared. Or maybe I was crazy. It could also be a dream, but one glance at Zack and his black eye told me it wasn't. It was too real for that.

"Listen to me, Zack. Did Dad do that to you?" I asked. "Your eye?"

Zack stared at me, but he didn't respond.

"Yes or no?" I said.

He shook his fist up and down: *yes*. A cold wave spread through my body.

I grabbed Zack's hand and tried to pull him from the bed, but he was heavy and unwilling to follow me. "Be right back," I told him. "I'm going to get help."

To get him to move, I would need the help of a beautiful woman. I moved through the party, trying to avoid the eyes of guests whose unknown intentions now frightened me. I didn't trust anyone here.

I ran, searching for the door. When I finally found it, I jerked it open and tumbled back into The Bender's rank hall.

It was empty, and the circus tent wallpaper seemed to pulse in the light which flickered from elephant-shaped wall sconces. I hadn't seen them earlier, but they were dust-covered and faded, as if they'd been there for years. I bent down to rest my hands on my knees. The floor no longer revealed the industrial platform it had before. Instead, black went on forever, dotted with stars. Dizziness forced me to press my hand onto the door, which was cool and slick beneath my palm. When I was once more able to stand, I looked again in the door's window. Our father was clomping toward the hall, a taller, darker drink in his hand.

I RAN THE length of the hallway until I couldn't breathe anymore. I wasn't sure how far I'd come, but one of the many windows to my left showed me another place, a beach in winter, covered with snow. I peered into the window of the command center door, which seemed to have followed me as I ran; it was the same arched door I'd seen before, when I first entered the Bender. As I'd run, I could always see it to my right, in the corner of my eye. Through the window, the three women in black and a man in a purple fedora lounged in chairs shaped like high heels.

I opened the door. None of them stirred. Two of the women were touching heads, giggling.

The third woman, the one from before, the whisperer, chewed her nails and peered at a black-rimmed flat-screen television – it even had the SAMSUNG logo below it – on the far wall above a huge wooden wheel like those you'd find on a ship. On the screen a mess of colored dots and arrows and blue lines like the streets on a GPS shifted and changed. I thought for a moment I saw the outline of a fox disappear off the screen. The man in the fedora was speaking too loudly for the size of the room: "Damn it all, the bloody foxbusters! Can you believe we made it out of there, all intact? Or mostly, anyway. Holy key limes, crewsters!"

"Excuse me," I said. "I need your assistance. My brother went into one of the rooms, and he won't come out. Please, it's urgent. I need a woman."

The man whistled. "I'll say," he said. "I would drink to that."

The three women turned their heads. The one from earlier stood. "I remember you," she said. "My name is Belinda. Your brother is fine. I led him to the midway myself. I suspected you may have gone through."

"But I just saw him. He was at my father's party. He had a black eye. I need to get him out of there."

"Impossible!" said the man. "You can't take him out with you."

"Why not?"

"You're here only because you haven't chosen," Belinda said. "Your reality. That brother is not yours for the taking."

"We have a plan for people like you," said the man.

"People like me? Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Captain, of course. And I'm telling you, I know you. You're unhappy with the way things are, back at home. You're exhausted. You wake up every day on the wrong side of the road and wish you had a choice in it all. I'm here to tell you that you do. You have four choices, in fact."

"Why won't anyone help me get my brother?" I said.

Belinda reached out and squeezed my hand. "Please," she said. "I'll explain everything." She turned to the man. "Captain, don't you have some piloting to do? I'm afraid we're quite off course."

Belinda led me from the room so we could speak without distracting Captain, she said. She asked me to sit with her on the glass floor. I did, though I tried my hardest not to glance down.

"Don't you worry," she said. "You get used to feeling like you're falling all the time."

This is what she told me then: The Bender was indeed the hub for the Multiverse. I was smart, she said, to figure that out, never mind that she had flat out told me; no one ever believed the words of a state fair vendor, though they were often more true than a scientist's. Each outer door led to a new reality. The brother I'd seen wasn't mine, not really. Rather he belonged to the Nikki in his own world, a Nikki whose father had not left when she was young.

Then she told me that I was here, in the Primalverse with them, because I had not chosen a future. I had seen a world behind a door, and it had raised a question. I was asking myself if one of these realities might hold a happier me. This was a question she said she could not answer. This was the reason I would be given a choice.

Three doors. I had gone through my first and found it wanting. I could go through two more, experience those realities, see if they held an ideal world. After the third, I would be forced to choose. Any of the three I'd visited, or my own, which waited frozen for me, though it would not wait forever. I had twenty-four hours, and that was all. Already I had used a quarter of that time.

I didn't say to her what it was flashed through my head; would there be a world where my brother could take of himself, where he could speak? Or where our mother had not left me with a man-sized burden?

I set the timer on my watch.

I SEARCHED THE windows for a scene that called to me. Vibrant landscapes, dull white rooms I passed on, until I came to a window which revealed my mother's house as it had appeared that morning. Only here, the light shone through the living room as it no longer did. Rarely did we open the curtains anymore; it would be like a betrayal of our grief.

As soon as I felt the brown shag beneath my feet, I smelled the sugar scent of chocolate chip

cookies just browned enough to take from the oven. Mom always burned them; she couldn't smell them being done as I could. I rushed into the kitchen, slipped the potholders onto my hands, and pulled the sheet from the oven.

"Oh, I forgot about them again," said my mother's voice from the hall. "Thanks, dear. I guess you came just in time."

Mom wore her ratty blue robe, a staple in her dying days, but she seemed different in it now. Her face glowed with life. Her hair was combed and wet, her cheeks free of the pillow marks that had taken over like wrinkles when she'd been confined to bed for weeks at a time. Her skin was smooth, and when I hugged her, hard, it smelled of soap and powder.

She hugged me just as hard back – always she had understood that sometimes, without explanation, people just need to feel the pressure of love – but she whispered into my ear: "Is everything okay? You seem frazzled."

"It's just you, Mom. You're here. You look so good."

"Why, thank you." Mom pulled back, held her arms out to her side. "I gussied up just for you." I was aware of tears in my eyes. Mom noticed them too, pulled me back into the hug. "Nikki, what happened?"

"You're okay," I said. "I had a dream, that you were dead."

"I'm fine. I'm going to live a long time yet. You don't have to worry about me." She kissed the top of my hair like she used to do when I was a little girl. "What we do have to worry about is these cookies sticking to the pan. You want to help me?"

I began slipping the spatula under the cookies and moving them to the cooling rack. "Is Zack still asleep?" I asked. The clock told me it was noon, but he'd been known to sleep all day if we let him.

"Who?" Mom picked up a cookie and blew on it.

"Very funny."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mom popped the cookie in her mouth, held her hand to my forehead.

"I'm fine." I arranged three cookies on a plate. "I'm going to go wake him up."

"Wake who up?"

"Zack, Mom. You know, your other child?"

"I don't get the joke."

That familiar wave of cold again. Without answering, I walked through the house to the hall, moved down it, checking doors as I went, light-headed. Déjà fucking vu, I thought. All the rooms were the same, except for his. Where before his door had led to a dark den with a bed, a shelf of stuffed animals, a CD rack and a Jimbay drum abandoned in the corner, now the room was filled with craft supplies: a sewing machine, several boxes of buttons, a few plastic containers full of beads and string. On the table by the far window a pair of pants dangled, empty of a body. Just like the room.

Mom appeared in the doorframe. "What's going on with you?"

"I don't have a brother?" I asked.

She shook her head, slowly.

"Sorry," I said. "I must have dreamt that too. I'm tired. I'm just not feeling like myself is all."

"You should lie down. I worry about you. Are you sleeping enough? You can't let school stress you out, okay? You need an outlet. Do you have an outlet?"

My smile broke through. It was nice to have someone who worried. I'd forgotten how much it meant, how much I missed it.

"I do yoga," I lied. "I'm fine. Stress is in line."

I couldn't lie down, not with Mom there, the scene so ordinary with the plate of cookies, her mug of cold coffee. I joined her at the table, closing my eyes as I slid into the seat. Every part of this I wanted to remember completely. We talked about school and romance, and I repeated every word she said in my head, hoping to commit them to memory. I told her I'd been so busy I didn't have time for love. She said that was okay, that I would make time when I was ready, when I found the right man…or woman, she added. I didn't say I doubted that was true, that there was no time to make, what with all my responsibilities. I could tell from the way her head tilted far to the side when she spoke to me that in this reality, I didn't have responsibilities. She mentioned my father in a way that told me he had abandoned us here, too. I tried not to think of the father I'd met earlier.

Despite the warmth my mother radiated, our conversation felt hollow. I couldn't tell her what I wanted to, couldn't speak to her about grief, about Zack. I had to edit myself to keep from slipping Zack into the conversation, had to skirt around his existence. Without being able to confide everything in my mother, I felt as if I could confide nothing.

I couldn't choose her at the expense of Zack.

I asked her for an old picture book I knew it would take a long time to find. Once she left the room, I went through the front door. There are some things you don't want to have to do twice, and saying goodbye to a mother is one of them.

THIS TIME WHEN I re-entered The Bender, miniature stuffed animals were suspended from strings attached to the glass ceiling with duct tape. A llama brushed the top of my head as I ducked into the hall. They had been sewn from colored felt, deep reds and blues, beige, none of the usual flashy colors. I lifted my hand and let my fingers brush them: a lion, a bat, an earthworm. I held my breath and stared up at them until I could no longer see them as separate entities, just one colored blur above, blocking out the stars. I felt as if they were mine to see alone, and for a moment the choke in my throat from seeing my mother lessened.

From the control room, I heard music, what sounded like a synthesized polka. Also, voices. When I opened the door, the control room was different. Strips of silver hung from this ceiling and sparkled in the light of paper lanterns. The shoe-shaped chairs in which the crew had previously sat were now the shape of red lips, and I couldn't see the crew, though I could hear them laughing.

As I crept further into the room, they came gradually into focus. Each of them wore a jumpsuit which matched the decorations so perfectly they had blended in. Captain came toward me, and as he did the colors of his clothes shifted with the objects he passed.

"Back so soon?" he said. "Still haven't found your bread crumbs, then?"

"Not quite," I said. "What's the occasion?"

"For the party? What isn't the occasion?" Here he leaned in so close I could feel his hot breath. Unlike Belinda's, his churned my stomach. "I don't know how you got here, you know. Usually people get stuck in the doors. Once they leave, they don't ever come back. But you, Ms Nikki, you found us here in the void. You must be a special kind of woman."

"I'm not," I said, backing away. "At least not in the way you would like."

"If you say so," he said. "Would you like a wink of wing juice? The bottle says toxic, but we think that just means enjoy in moderation!"

"No thanks," I said. From the screen against the wall I heard a frantic beeping. A huge red dot was moving toward the smaller green, both of them traveling the length of a blue line. "Shouldn't you be controlling the ship?"

"He doesn't," Belinda said, "control the ship."

Captain mumbled his way back to one of the chairs.

"Why is he called Captain then?"

Belinda leaned in. "He likes to think he controls things. Really it's us – me mostly – does the controlling." She smiled. "He's more like our entertainment. He likes you, though. We all do."

"That's nice," I said. "Those other two haven't really talked to me."

Belinda shrugged.

"Those animals," I said. "Who made them?"

"Do you like them?" She beamed. "I won them for you. I thought they might make you feel more at ease."

"They did. Thank you."

"Have you made your decision?"

"No," I said. "I still have one door to go."

She placed her hand on my shoulder. It seemed everyone was doing that these days. I'd forgotten how she had first made my stomach jump.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she said. "Go."

CHOOSING THE THIRD door was more difficult. No obvious choice presented itself, and so I rushed from door to door and pressed my hand against each, trying to let my skin decide. Most of them were cool, the same temperature as the hall, but then I came to one where the cold of the steel bit into my hand, startling in its variance from the others. I looked through the window and knew my choice had been made.

The other side of the door left me feeling immediately as if my choice had been wrong. I'd felt drawn from the window to its stark whiteness – how boring it seemed – as I used to be drawn to smaller Christmas presents, sure that they would hold the best treasure, as they so often did. But once the smell came at me – bleach and laundry detergent – I felt overwhelmed by the decision I would soon be forced to make. Still, I walked on.

I was in some sort of laundry facility. Washers thumped on one side of the room, dryers on the other. There were no people around. I found another door which led to a hallway that reeked of antiseptic. Down the hall, with closed doors to either side, I found a check-in desk like those at doctors' offices. Behind the desk sat a woman. Her attention was occupied by a sheet of paper before her.

"Excuse me," I said.

She looked up. Her eyes brightened. "Ms Nikki," she said. "We haven't seen you in quite some time."

"Oh, yes," I said. "I've been busy."

"I know," she said. "How was the Czech Republic? I've seen some of your show."

"My show?"

"You know, Zack's very proud of you." She leaned across the desk, as if she were going to tell me a secret. "Some of the nurses don't think Zack understands very much, but I think he understands more than he lets on. He sees you on the TV sometimes, and he points, he laughs." The television caught her eye, and she pointed upwards. "Speak of the devil," she said.

On the TV, I stood before the backdrop of Prague's Old Town Square, which was teeming with people and stalls selling colored eggs and beer in plastic cups. A logo in the corner read, TravelTimes with Nikki Nolan. The last name wasn't mine; I was a Lyle, not a Nolan. Sure enough, as I held a fat soft pretzel up to the camera, a solid silver band glinted on my finger.

I wondered who she or he was, if she traveled with me. If I'd seen all of the world. What was it like out there, an almost infinite number of doors to choose from? Was I in love, with the world and with a someone and with the life I'd been able to live?

"Can I see my brother?" I asked.

"Of course," said the woman. After I stood there a minute too long, she frowned. "Did you forget? Room 216," she said.

I found 216, a wood and rough-grained door with a shiny gold knob. Inside Zack slept face down atop the blankets. I'd seen him sleep like that before, and it made me laugh. I said his name. His head jerked up. He looked older, much older than me, which he was – ten years older, in fact – but it wasn't until that moment that I realized *I* might be older too. To be out there seeing the world as I was, I must have already completed college.

I gawked at the mirror hung on the backside on his door. I looked the same. Of course, people with Down's Syndrome often age more quickly, but Zack had always seemed so youthful in our reality, like a child. Perhaps, I thought, looking around at his dull white room, he'd matured. Or the home was to blame. I'd read that homes could do that to a person, worsen a condition. Being in a strange place would certainly stress Zack out, make him less comfortable than our own home. He wouldn't like the bare walls, the absence of faces he had known since childhood.

He didn't smile when I said hello, but he had never done that. I rushed to his bedside and hugged him close.

"I've missed you." I didn't know if it meant anything to him, but I had to say it. "How have you been?"

Zack swung his legs over the side of the bed. His eyes were trying to close against the light, still lazy with sleep.

"How have you been, Zack? Good, bad, okay?" I held my thumb up, down, to the side.

He gave me a thumbs up.

"Good? You've been good?"

He held two fingers in the center of his palm.

"Hot dog? You want a hot dog? I'm sure we could arrange that."

I held out my hand, and he took it. I asked him to lead me to the cafeteria, but he kept falling back, so I followed the signs and led him there instead. The cafeteria was located in a large room with a serving line at the front, where a handful of patients moseyed with trays in hand. Round orange tables were scattered across the black-and-white tile, few of them filled. Zack and I

waited through the line, and though there were no hot dogs, there were hamburgers, which we both ordered plain with ketchup only. I always used to forget that he didn't like vegetables on his sandwiches, but it seemed important that I remember, at least this once.

We sat at a table near the back and ate. He repeated the hot dog sign a couple of times, so I had to point at his burger, sweep my hand down in an L – *later*. Later was another one of the words Zack hated. He shook his head, uttered his guttural *no!*

"It's okay, Zack. Be happy, okay?"

And it was true, it was okay. There I was, watching him eat his burger, and it had only been less than twenty-four hours – I glanced at my watch, twenty-two hours, in fact – but it felt like weeks. "How long have I left you here?" I asked, voice shaking.

He didn't answer, and I didn't want him to. I knew it had been a long time, regardless that I still looked the same age, and he so much older. But, despite the graying hair, he still had the same tics, the same contempt for words, the same demands for the same foods. It was me who was really different. It was the smallest of changes, but it was significant; I couldn't live in a world where my life hadn't included my brother, despite him being happy, despite my own apparent happiness. There had to be some way to see the world and take care of my brother, some way to make it work.

I kissed the top of his hair; it smelled of oil and eucalyptus shampoo, his favorite back at home, too. I couldn't say I was sorry. That word too was forbidden. Instead I thought it, tried to make him know it from the way my eyes met his. He kept eating his fries.

I backed out of the cafeteria, and once hidden from his view I ran through the halls, back to the laundry room door, slipping on the white tile. I burst through the door back into The Bender.

BELINDA WAS WAITING in the hall. Her jumpsuit shone purple in the light. She looked at her watch as I emerged.

"Cutting it close," she said. "Forty minutes left. Have you decided?"

I nodded.

"Well, hold it in a bit longer. I have a proposition for you." She took my hand. Together we entered the control room through the arched door. Captain was in a corner of the room, which now displayed the same striped wallpaper as the hall. The other women weren't around. Without music or Captain blaring, I could make out the intermittent whir of an engine in the walls.

"Does Captain do anything but goof off?"

"He makes a mad orange scone," Belinda said. "And his party tricks are to die for. He does this thing with an apple and a mouse. Absolutely brilliant. Though it does take some doing to find a suitable rodent."

She stopped before the screen, pointed upward. Her other hand, soft and sweaty, squeezed mine. I tilted my head, and a giant ball of blue-green pulsated before me, waves of light snaking like tentacles from its center. It was so beautiful my breath left me. I raised my hands to the top of my head.

"I want you," she said, "to stay with us."

I looked back to her. She too was beautiful, though I hadn't really noticed just how beautiful. I had trained myself not to fully notice things like that – too little time to stop and consider faces, lips; hers were right there in front of me, as if she was daring me to notice them, full and pink, curved up at the ends in a mysterious smile. I kissed her because I could.

"Is that a yes?" she asked when we parted. "Wait, don't answer." She turned to the screen, keyed in some letters and numbers, hit the red button. "Look at this, first. A complete map of this place, the Primalverse. We can show you so much."

On the screen new dots winked and rotated. Upon closer inspection, I saw that five of the dots were shaped like ships. They drifted about in the void.

"What are those other ships?" I asked.

"Other hubs, for other universes. Where you don't exist, where you don't have to worry at all about family. About any of it. The craziest stuff you've ever seen lurks behind the doors in those ships. I can take you there. We can travel them together. I'm due for a vacation, after all."

"How many?"

"Hundreds. This map is just the edge."

The desert was nothing compared to this. Belinda's hand was still in mine, and her lips had left the taste of salt. It made me thirsty. The intersecting colors on the screen resembled a piece of modern art you might see in a famous gallery, obscure and inspiring. Just watching it made my mind race. There is a difference between imagining love from a ring on a finger and feeling it right in front of you, an arm's reach away. But there was no way to tear myself in two, to be both the people I wanted to be. I shook my head, slowly at first, then faster.

"No," I said. "I don't think I can."

"He's safe," Belinda said. "We can make him safe for you. But you can't ever go back there. You can't enter any of these doors again, not in this hub."

"You want me to give up my home?"

"Trade your home, for hundreds of others."

There was a woman's hand in mine, the soft warmth of skin I hadn't felt in two years now, ever since Mom got sick. What would it be like, I wondered, to have someone to hold onto?

I looked down at our clasped hands. The timer blinked on my wrist. Twenty minutes, it read. I felt my heart speed. What if I just stayed here, right until the end? Made my decision at the last minute? Waited until my heart was beating so fast I couldn't stand it anymore?

But I couldn't. I would regret even this hesitation. I let go of her hand. I glanced around the control room once more, but I didn't look at the screen. I didn't look at the floor or the ceiling. I looked at the dizzying walls, at the sleeping Captain. I didn't look at Belinda.

As I turned, I felt her hand, for a moment, enter my pocket, like she was trying to hold me back. I jerked myself away and continued through the door. Walked down the hall. All the doors appeared the same, and for a panicked moment I wondered how I would be able to recognize it; there wasn't time to peer through each and every window.

But then I felt it, the sweltering heat of Texas drifting through the air-conditioned building. I looked through the window at fairgoers paused, frozen, as they pushed toward promises of life-changing visions and best value makeovers. A woman stood before The Bender, brows pinched in confusion, her mouth open, as if she'd been speaking to the invisible space where, an instant before, Belinda had stood. I exited.

Down the ramp I ran, across the paths, kicking dirt up into my mouth, zigzagging through the immobile mob. The bright lights of the midway arched before me, until I stood beneath them. The timer on my watch told me I had five minutes to go. I didn't want Zack to be without me any longer. I didn't want to be without him.

I knew where he would have gone: the roller coaster.

The line was long, but I spotted him toward the back. I ducked under the queue rope and stood beside him. His hands straight down by his sides, the fanny pack he always wore loose around his waist, his bright green shoes tied tight. He was half-smiling. That would change once he realized I'd returned. He'd be even angrier when he realized he needed ten tickets to ride the coaster.

But right now, he was the brother he'd been when we were little and we played Uno together or camped in our backyard, pretending our parents were a distant memory. We didn't have to pretend anymore, and it wasn't like we'd thought it would be then, endless cookies and late nights.

When we get home, I thought, I'll make you cookies.

I leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. He would never let me do that. With two minutes left, I put my hands into my pocket, felt something there, and pulled out a sheet of bright red tickets. I recalled the weight of Belinda's hand. I grinned.

I reached down and slipped the tickets into Zack's open palm, closed his fist around them. Then I ducked back under the rope, looked him over one more time, and went around to the exit. There I would wait for him, to rouse, to ride, to go home.

This is Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam's fourth story for *Interzone*. She lives in Texas with her partner and two literarily-named cats: Gimli and Don Quixote. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast program and curates the annual Art & Words Show in Fort Worth. You can visit her on Twitter @BonnieJoStuffle or through her website: www.bonniejostufflebeam.com.

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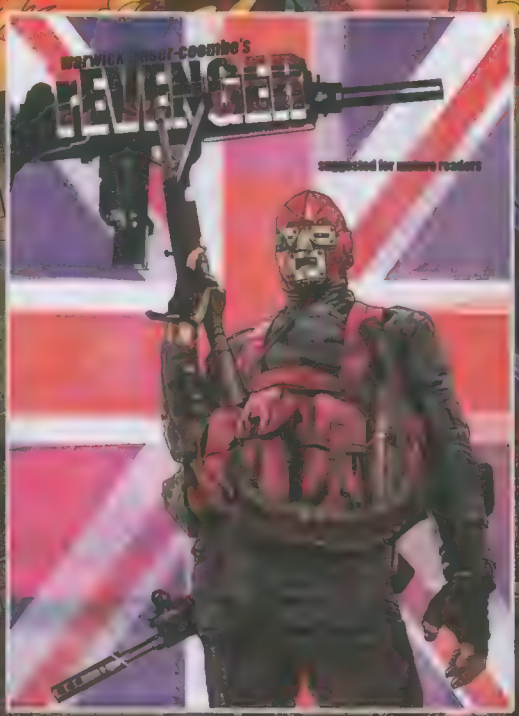

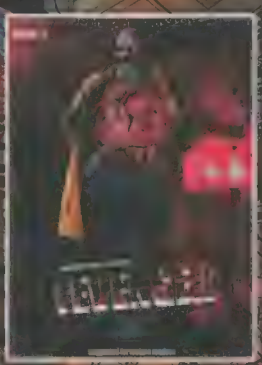

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NEWARK TO ST LOUIS

35,000 feet over Pennsylvania and we're finally above the brown film of smog that enshrouds the east coast. To the west, billowing up out of the white horizon, I can see a thousand-armed dancing Nataraja, braiding his hands into a slow-turning column; a cumulo-castle thousands of yards wide.

I am that thousand-armed shape-shifter. My wealth has been created out of thin air – hedge funds, arbitrage, global macro strategies; jargon and numbers in the ether. My kind doesn't actually *do* anything. There's no product: no violin crafted, no corn grown, no poem created, no pipes plumbed, no cement foundations poured. The stupid bastards back in the cheap seats haven't a clue.

We pass over a place where the cloud cover is thin and the black-green world suddenly appears below. Earth: strange vision, dream. The ground is unreal from up here. Cities so small they look like they've already returned to dust. Unreal, yes, unless the sun starts melting the wax that holds your flimsy wings together, and you begin to fall.

The climb to the heavens probably started with Icarus. What made him ascend so high? Fascination with fire? Insidious ambition?

ST LOUIS TO DENVER

More ethereal white cloud cities; blue in the chasms between; and the illusion of geometric farms beneath. It's the same geometry that keeps me alive up here in this plastic and metal box. Da Vinci drafted a bat-winged contraption out of the desire to spread his arms and copy the Icarus myth – only this time he intended to live to tell the tale. How many hours did he spend in his studio, pulling at the tip of a duck wing, spreading the feathers open, studying the pattern, the paper-light vocabulary of bone, trying

to trick the secret from the space between the feathers?

Of course, that's just more bullshit that people want to believe: the genius trying to uncover the mysteries of nature. Da Vinci was probably trying to craft a war machine. There's always money in war. Both world wars were fought for Krupp and Standard Oil. Eight or nine years after World War II the allies handed the largest armaments manufacturer in Hitler's Germany – Alfried Krupp – the keys back to his business. By 1960 he was the richest man in Europe.

There's no actual competition up here in the stratosphere. Never has been. We are the new angels, the final angels, pure and refined – almost abstract – handed everything on a golden plate, taking what we want when we want it. Fuck up the economy, engage in illegal shenanigans? Everyone bows down in awe, says: "Here, have some more money."

The stewardess looks tired. Dark circles beneath her eyes. Ten years ago I would have flirted, pursued her. I'm too tired now. Like me, the world has become ancient, boring. Too much illusion and nothingness: numbers and cars, numbers and houses, numbers and wives, numbers and children, numbers and grandchildren; numbers that add up to nothing.

I want out.

THREE DENVER TO SACRAMENTO

My second wife, Jean, inquired whether there were really executives who believed that idiotic bumper sticker slogan: "The one who has the most toys in the end wins." And I said, yes, they do. They wouldn't put it that way – there would be more statistics and supply-side crap and pooled investment vehicle mumbo-jumbo to back up the position, but yes, the fundamental belief is there. She said that it was a snotty prep school boy's view of the world.

Indeed.

Still, I had so wanted her to be more than briefly appalled. I had wanted her to be horrified that her lifestyle came from a man who participated in a system designed by snotty adolescent boys. Did I want her to hate me? Maybe. It might have been the only way I could have actually loved her.

The Great Salt Lake and its sand-edges are rust, brown-white. Fingers of ochre paint dipped in black ink, surrounded by what look like the mountains of the moon. What of the men slung-shot to the moon? What was that really about? Back then, when I was young, I found the race to the moon exhilarating. Space was a stand-in for an ambition with no limits.

At the eastern edge of the lake, there's a peninsula that looks like the great western devil. Satan. Pan. Peter Pan. My first wife, Suzanne, believed I had Peter Pan Syndrome, believed my feet were never touching the ground, that I was a man desperate to always be in the air. *Puer aeternus*, she called me. The eternal boy. Commitment issues, she said. She was wrong. If anyone in the family has Peter Pan Syndrome, it's my son, Jesse. When he was a boy all he wanted was flying lessons, flying lessons, flying lessons. He wanted to be an aircraft carrier pilot. I paid for the flying lessons, but it came to nothing. All he really wanted to do was float high up here in the rarefied air. Now he fights 'corporate greed' in Marin County with his hippie wife, two kids, and a nanny, living off his stock portfolio.

I think he wants to actually *be an angel.*

The rich are worthless.

Beyond the lake, the Nevada basin and range stretches out. God, to be down there on the desert floor, to touch the stone, to feel the heat of the stone; to close my eyes and lift my face to the sun, alone…

FOUR THE HOLLOW MEN

I found Rafael by the Sacramento bus station. He was pushing a shopping cart full of plastic bags filled with clothes, newspapers, cans, cigarette butts. At first I thought the intense urine smell was coming from him, but then it became clear it was rising with the heat off the pavement. The sun in this city is merciless, boiling every stain back up into the pale brown sky. Back in the day, there used to be shade trees lining every street. What happened to them all?

I bought him soup at a Panera, then asked

him to take me to his camp. I want to see all aspects of his life. It has nothing to do with looking for something more real than my world of faux angel wings. I'm not fool enough to believe that Rafael's world is more real than mine simply because it's more uncomfortable and desperate. I think I just want to see how far someone can slip off the edge of the earth in this society. And, more importantly, I want to find out why, if they have nothing to lose, what in hell keeps them from fighting back?

He leads me south, down 3rd Street, toward the confluence of the two major highways that flow through Sacramento – 5 and 80. I buy us some water and a bottle of tequila at a corner store. The tequila is meant to loosen Rafael's tongue.

As we walk, the sun burns a hole through my head and I wonder aloud how Rafael can stand the heat with all the layers of clothes he's wearing, the plastic bags wrapped around his feet? He drinks and drinks, says nothing.

We pass through neighbourhoods that are completely devoid of human life – open windows like black empty sockets; no faces anywhere, no music, nothing except the echo of the cans rattling in Rafael's cart. It sounds like the end of the world. It brings to mind T.S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men': This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper. I change it slightly and recite it out loud to Rafael: "This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but an echo." He is more impressed with the tequila. Eventually he stops handing the bottle back to me.

FIVE BENEATH THE HIGHWAY

The camp is on a concrete apron, buckled and broken by grass, weeds; surrounded by huge concrete columns holding up Route 80 and Route 5. The noise from the trucks overhead is deafening. There are four mattresses arranged around a fire pit.

"You live with other people?" I ask Rafael.

He nods, takes a final swig from the bottle of tequila, throws it across the concrete apron. The sound of breaking glass is lost to the highway noise above us.

Two men and a woman wander into camp. They have been out scavenging food. The woman is the obvious leader, introduces herself to me as Grace, the other two as Gideon and Vito. They spread the day's find out on one of the mattresses: day old doughnuts, two plastic milk jugs filled with water, a few apples, and a bag of burgers from a sympathetic McDonald's employee downtown. Rafael looks down at the food and moans, starts punching one of the concrete columns. Smack, smack, his fists bloody. The other men wrestle him to the ground, sit on top of him, and wait for him to calm down. It's obvious they've been through this routine many times before.

Grace's eyes burn into me. "We don't have alcohol in this camp," she says. "You see what it does to him." Then she begins a sermon about staying pure for the angels.

Angels? Is she kidding? What angels?

Rafael eventually stops moaning and struggling and Gideon and Vito get off him, lead him over to the mattress with the food. Grace intones a long prayer about angels and Jesus and mercy and heaven. When she's finished, Rafael begins pawing at the burgers with his bloody knuckles, which immediately puts me off the food. I sit back, watch everyone eat, and think of my wife, Lou-Ann. What would she say if she saw me sitting under this highway with these people, my head swimming with the intense heat, shit stink and piss wafting up from the concrete all around. I could take a series of images with my phone, send them to her, but I decide against it. I know that she'll look at the images and go blank because the images don't fit into her world.

She's a Texan. They only believe what suits them.

SIX ANGEL FIRE

The flames of the bonfire shoot three storeys into the air, consuming ply boards, couches, newspaper, chairs, cardboard boxes, tree branches, you name it. A man wearing two down coats, one over the other in this infernal heat, shouts above the roar of the fire, confessing his sins to the

crowd. It's the usual litany of the sinner: gambling, "laying down with whores," selling drugs. The crowd punctuates his confession with gospel shouts of "Tell it!" and "Live in the Lord!" and "Draw the angels down!" I get the feeling that the more the crowd responds, the more sins he finds to confess, making things up just for the attention. But I'm cynical that way. When he finishes, he strips both coats off and tosses them into the flames. The crowd goes wild. Others rush up to the bonfire, shout out their confessions, and toss more valuables into the flames.

These people have lit a fire in order to draw apocalyptic angels down to the earth, bring an end to their misery. Grace has informed me that these fires are happening everywhere, in every city, across the earth. The time is nigh, she said. How could I have missed this? Why hasn't it been on the news?

Grace and Gideon stand near the front, shout their amens and hallelujahs along with everyone else. Their eyes burn – fierce, almost angry – reflecting the firelight. All the other faces look the same – on the verge of erupting into violence. Sadly, the violence is completely contained in this act of confession, in what they toss into the fire. Strange to be here firsthand and know that probably some marketing department genius on Madison Avenue thought all this up.

But for what reason? The usual: distraction.

I move toward the front, shout out my own sermon. I want the people in this crowd to know that they are monstrously poor so that a few can be insanely rich. I tell them that the angels are just a marketing ploy to keep them in their place, that they need to be burning down banks, battling it out in the streets. They boo me down. On cue, cop cars and fire trucks arrive. The cops, in full riot gear, clear a path with their truncheons for the firemen and hoses. Everyone scatters.

SEVEN THE AMERICAN RIVER

Running from the cops last night was the most fun I've had in years, maybe in decades. The thrill of the chase and all that: blue and red lights flashing, sirens howling; chaos, beautiful chaos, everywhere. I followed a group down here to the bank of the American River. If you were on a boat drifting by, you'd never know how many homeless camps there are along this river, all hidden by a thick growth of trees and wild brush.

My phone was full of voice messages and texts this morning, mostly from Lou-Ann and my business partner, Ivan. All asking the same question: where are you?, where are you?, and *where the fuck are you?* Lou-Ann is worried, angry. Ivan spewed his usual anxiety and rage, calling my no-show with the investment team at Procure this morning "a fucking cliché." There were also a few voice mail messages from Procure. I was supposed to give them the usual voodoo: "In order to manage risk appropriately blah-blah risks bottom-up manager evaluation blah-blah top-down macro outlook…" How does anyone believe in that shit? Make money from it, yes indeed. Con the masses with it, sure. But *believe it*?

My third wife, Dezzy, accused me of hating everything and everyone, of believing in nothing. "You don't even believe in the financial system you work for," she said.

I agreed and that shocked her. "Belief is the problem," I told her. "Belief is about clinging to someone or something to maintain your own worth."

After she left me, she found Jesus. Not the more famous flaming sword, death-to-you-all Jesus, but the gentle one, meek and mild. I thought for years that her conversion was about revenge against my lack of belief.

She became a Methodist, maybe a Presbyterian – some sterile wing of the Protestant church. On the rare occasions when we spoke after the divorce she would invariably use the word Agape. It was some new ideal for her. Agape this, Agape that: the love of one's fellow men through the love of God. She insisted that I would never be able to understand what she was talking about. One of the last things she ever said to me was: "You're missing something…inside."

I normally would have told her that, unlike her, I had remained whole – because I never gave myself over to a belief or to someone else – but she looked so smug and silly and ignorant, puffed up with her shallow insight into my condition, that all I could do was smile and let her wallow in her new found illusions.

I should throw the phone into the water, but I'm not quite ready for that yet.

EIGHT NEVADA GHOSTS

The heat was too much for me in Sacramento so I rented a car, slipped south of the Sierras, out of the smog, across the Owens Valley. I followed The Daylight Pass east into Nevada, and found a ridiculous ghost town called Rhyolite in the middle of the desert, named after the volcanic stone found in the area. There are little placards everywhere, put up by the Park Service, explaining the town's brief history. Apparently it was a boomtown in 1904, gone by 1911. Someone got rich and got out before the going got rough. Everyone else became a ghost.

Sound familiar?

There are a few gutted buildings, scattered among desert brush, and a house made of refuse bottles, re-built by some film company in 1925. Apparently, a few long forgotten films were made here. It's the American way: the economic system squeezes the town dry, turns it into a ghost, and then Hollywood turns the ghost into a money-making spectacle. It's the glorious man-made weather-cycle of money.

Last but not least, some artist has put up a life size sculpture mimicking Da Vinci's Last Supper at the edge of the town. The gestures are the same as in the painting, but these bodies are encased in shrouds. I suppose they're meant to look like ghosts, convening after the apocalypse.

What is this fascination with ruins? Is it titillation, the kind you get watching a horror movie, the great and holy fear of death drawing us in? For some reason, ruins give me a sense of relief. An acknowledgement that this is where we're all heading. Maybe part of the relief comes from the fact that no one is exempt. Even the sun's not forever.

Angels and ruins.

I get out of the car, watch cloud shadows move across the land for a while, listen to the wind. I've finally achieved the solitude I've been craving for so long.

I open my mouth and I scream. It's surprising how the sound is immediately swallowed in this vast space.

I scream again, louder.

I scream at Lou-Ann and her sureness. I scream at my son, who can't make up his fucking mind as to what he wants to be in this world. I scream at my third wife, Dezzy, with her fucking self-righteous smile and her Agape and her lucrative divorce settlement. I scream at my mother, my holier-than-thou mother, praying to the angels and saints for my soul; my mother who would have tossed her last shoes into an angel fire if she were still alive; my mother, bowing and scraping across the church floor, through the stations of the cross, then wiping the asses of the rich with that sanctified smile of hers; my mother, who took it all lying down, because it meant she was surely going to heaven – how could she not when she had served and served and served with such beauteous humility?

And what did it get her? Cancer. She gave everything away to *them* – always to *them*, forever to *them* – thinking that she was serving god.

I scream and scream.

Someone screams back.

NINE THE RIDDLE

I hold my breath, listen: nothing but wind. Was it an auditory hallucination? I scream again and there it is again – the echo. It sounds as if it is coming from the other side of the ramshackle mercantile store.

How is that even possible? There is no other car in sight.

I move towards the store. The escape from the police in Sacramento has done my knees in, so the going is slow. When I reach it, I stop and listen again. There is only the wind. I let go another scream, and once again, someone screams back. This time there is no mistake, the scream is definitely coming from the other side of the store. I rush around the corner of the crumbling building and almost run into a man wrapped in a ragged brown horse blanket.

His eyes pop open wide. He's terrified. I'm angry. I feel robbed, thinking I was alone. I scream at him: "Where the fuck is your car?"

He looks me up and down, dubious. "Are you an angel?"

Down at his feet there's a little pile of kindling. I ask him if he's making a fucking angel fire and he lifts his arms, turns in a slow circle. The blanket slips off his shoulders, falls to the ground. He's naked.

"This is the place they're most likely to come down, man," he says. "It's pure out here."

He's exactly what I'd come out here to avoid. I demand to know how he had come to arrive here. "I was there and now I'm here," is his idiotic answer. "Cause and effect," he says, "time and space, hot and cold, liquid and solid… You got a match?"

Seriously? He's come out here to light an angel fire without matches, a lighter, nothing?

"Where are your clothes?" I ask him.

He looks confused for a second, then glances down at his naked belly. "Gave 'em up," he says. "I been angel-firing-it since Phoenix."

"What if they don't come?" I say.

He stares at me, uncomprehending. What could be passing through that broken mind of his?

I tell him that I'm leaving, offer to give him a lift to Beatty, the closest town. He doesn't respond, keeps staring through me, lost in his angel stupor. What can I do? I turn around, march back to the rental car, and take off. I imagine him still standing where I left him days from now, waiting for his addled brain to solve the riddle of the angels, slowly turning into one of the shrouds at the Rhyolite Last Supper.

TEN PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Phoenix was nothing but malls and brilliant sun glare off car chrome – and angel fires. There were so many columns of smoke rising from the city that I just kept going, headed south into the emptiness of Pinal County.

Has the world gone mad? Yes, but it was already mad. Belief, all this belief…what will it get them?

They've got to fight, to look it all in the eye and not blink, and, most importantly, to out con the conmen, to strip the false angels of their wax wings, melt them down, see just how sad and tawdry we really are…

Then, and only then, will they see.

ELEVEN END OF THE ROAD

Stars, wind, so cold. But I won't light a fire. Last night, a skinny apparition in a horse blanket appeared out of the darkness, asked for my clothes, but I would not give them up. I told him that that was *his way* to call the angels, not *mine*. It's the mistake his kind have made, again and again. Why do they always presume to know what angels want?

"You believe that all the angels want the same thing," I said. "That all the angels respond to the same thing." I snickered at my great joke in the dark. "Don't you realize that every angel is different?" I said. "You fucking moron, every angel has its own tastes, its own personal desires."

Some like fire; some enfold themselves lovingly in the dark. There is one who is waiting patiently, right now, not far off, for me to say the right word, the magic word, in order to appear. *Agape, arbitrage, Peter Pan, emptiness…*

"You've got to appeal to their individuality," I say. "Give them something they truly want." I laugh out loud at this and the sound startles me for a second.

I stop moving, listen. Something rustles in the brush to my left.

"What is it you truly want?" I whisper.

Shadows sway, change shape. I see a figure in front of me, several yards off: tall, hulking, ponderous. And there's a smell: of dog fur, cheeseburgers, piss, cologne.

The angel is approaching. I do not believe in angels and still an angel is approaching. "What do you want?" I ask, but deep down I know. I have always known.

Any angel of my creation has only one desire: to devour me.

Christien Gholson is the author of the novel *A Fish Trapped Inside the Wind* (Parthian, 2011) and a book of linked fictions, *On the Side of the Crow* (Hanging Loose Press, 2006; Parthian, 2011). He lives in the high desert of New Mexico where he has occasional encounters with sage-shaped angels, lost aliens, and bruja spells riding the flying dust. The ghosts of fence lizards sometimes enter his dreams at night and speak in a language that can only be described as various shades of blue. You can visit him online at christiengholson.blogspot.com.

Solid, entertaining but disquieting tales of how evil is not an external entity, but an unavoidable component of the human condition, rooted in the depth of the human soul. I cannot recommend this anthology enough: simply, dark fiction at its best" Mario Guslandi, Gumshoe

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MALCOLM DEVLIN
HER FIRST HARVEST

ILLUSTRATED BY VINCE HAIG

"Oh, how quickly things changed! Why didn't happiness last forever? Forever wasn't a bit too long"
—Katherine Mansfield, 'Her First Ball'

Nina's dress was made from synthetic silk; it was a pale silver grey which shone even in the thin phosphor lighting of Aunt Caroline's dressing room. Nina stood side-on to the mirror and twisted so she could see her back more clearly. The dress hung open from her shoulders, sweeping down in smooth symmetrical curves to meet in a discreet bow above her waist. Her exposed back struck her as looking unhealthy and pale in the thin blue light; her crop was barely more than a thick rumple of texture across her skin. It looked barely more valuable than heat rash.

She frowned. She'd hoped the shape of the dress would exaggerate the yield, she'd picked Minnie's grey one for just that purpose. Minnie said she'd worn it for her first harvest ball. That had been six years ago and Minnie's crop hadn't needed exaggerating even a little. Four months after her first seeding and her shoulders and spine had been ripe with fat clusters of button mushrooms growing in the shape of a heart centred around her spine. Everyone said they'd been so beautiful, and Aunt Caroline told Nina how heads had turned when Minnie arrived at the Governor's House.

Nina sighed, she had so hoped her own first crop would be a match for her cousin's, but her aunt shushed her when she tried to voice her concern.

"Nonsense," she said. "This is your first seeding, it's to be expected. Minnie was just a bit different, that's all."

Aunt Caroline turned her back round, steering her by the shoulders. She held her at arm's length so she could get a measure of her.

"Look at you," she said. "You look so beautiful and you'll only become more so, I promise. And besides, Minnie won't have any crop this year. None at all."

Nina smiled as bravely as she could muster.

Minnie wouldn't have a crop this year because she and Barnabas were trying for a baby, a very different sort of crop that meant they were both exempt from being seeded.

A voice called from downstairs and Nina's aunt smiled. "The carriage is here," she said. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, Aunt Caroline," said Nina.

"Wonderful." Aunt Caroline's harvest gown was a pale blue and her crop was strong this season. She had been seeded with an experimental variety that was particularly decorative: fat pink toadstool caps hung from long fibrous stems. They looked like bright jewels; they rippled across her back as she swept out of the room.

Nina considered her own reflection one more time. Maybe the light was just unflattering; maybe her crop wasn't so bad after all. She reached around gently to push her fingertips against the larger bulbs, growing in a line up the small of her back. They felt soft and powder dry. They moved fractionally as she brushed them. She imagined the roots of them inside her, spidering under her skin.

Aunt Caroline's voice called her from downstairs and Nina snapped her hand away guiltily.

"Coming, Aunt Caroline," she said.

She took a final look in the mirror before she turned off the lights. She swept up her bag and her light summer shawl to wear once her crop had been harvested, then ran downstairs to the meet her aunt and her cousin in the hallway.

The carriage was waiting outside the house; it looked like a balled fist of iron suspended between four enormous wheels. Its door was wide open and a walkway had been laid joining the steps of the house with the steps of the carriage.

The drivers were standing well back, buttoned up to their chins in oilskins; each wore thick goggles and facemasks.

There was a light wind which whipped her harvest gown up around her ankles, and she caught herself pressing her hands down to keep it in check. She saw how Minnie had taken the seam of fabric in one hand to counter the slack. She tried to do the same, clutching a handful of her gown at her hip and pulling it tight.

"Don't crease it, Nina," her aunt said.

"Sorry."

Inside, the carriage was plush and warm. It was round like a bathysphere, and upholstered from top to bottom with cushioned velvet. There were porthole windows on each side, surrounded by rubber filters which pumped and wheezed like steam bellows; but the glass was thick and so smeared and dirty on the outside

that only a fraction of the late afternoon light teased through and there was little chance of seeing anything outside.

They took seats inside, Nina and Minnie on the one side, Aunt Caroline on the other.

One of the drivers slammed the door shut and spun the handle to lock the seal.

Nina glanced at Minnie and smiled. Minnie didn't see her; she was staring ahead, lost in thought and blind to everything else. She was probably thinking about Barnabas, Nina thought. He wouldn't be joining them at the ball. Since they hadn't been seeded, he said it was a waste of time. Nina had heard raised voices in the house, but she hadn't said anything, and Aunt Caroline certainly wouldn't appreciate her doing so.

The carriage engines rumbled into life and the whole vehicle started to hum and vibrate. A *putt-putt-putt* sound from the exhaust chimney rang against the chassis and gathered tempo. There was a high scraping noise as the gears shifted somewhere beneath them and then the carriage lurched forward with a roar.

They reached the Governor's House in good time, and waited in the carriage as the drivers hosed the chassis down, stripping off the soot and grease that had built up over their journey. As they did so, Nina felt the temperature shift slightly, and the coolness was welcome. The journey had taken the best part of an hour and the atmosphere inside, while polite and silent, had threatened to superheat the air around them like a kettle and Nina was feeling quite faint.

When the door opened, she almost leaped at it, but Minnie set a hand on her knee to still her and the two cousins waited for Aunt Caroline to disembark before them.

"Are you nervous?" Minnie asked her when they were alone.

"No," Nina said. "Of course not."

Minnie smiled. "There's no harm in it."

Nina frowned. Minnie hadn't needed to be nervous for her first ball; her yield had been something special while Nina's was not. If her crop had been anything like as big as Minnie had produced, she wouldn't be nervous at all, she'd be marching down the walkway straight-backed and proud. She waited until her cousin had stepped down from the carriage before she moved to the door herself.

The Governor's House stood in the lee of the hills that rose up behind it like grey flints, hacked to sharpness by something primitive. The house was built in the same silver-grey slate that characterised most buildings in the colony, but it was bigger and grander than any other Nina had seen.

Three storeys tall, with a wide portico, fringed with black, glittering columns. It looked to Nina like a set of jaws opened wide, inviting her to be consumed.

Their carriage was only one of many, circling the wide driveway and disgorging their passengers in pairs and groups. A light mist had softened the air, diffusing the sharpness of the carriages' edges and making their phosphor lamps flare brightly and disperse like a procession of will-o'-the-wisps.

And then there were the people. Dozens of them, picking their way across the walkways to the front doors. Men and women, each heavy with their crops of mushrooms, brackets, bells and anemone, each extravagantly dressed in brocade, velvet, lace and muslins. Minnie had told her some people wore real silks too, imported from offworld.

"They make it with worms," Minnie had said. "Can you imagine such a thing?"

Whatever they wore, everyone looked so beautiful and so keen, each leaning forward with a barely contained anticipation mirroring Nina's own.

Aunt Caroline fussed with Nina's gown. Smoothing it with her hands, standing back critically to inspect her work.

"There's my girl," she said. She held up a hand inviting her to lead the way.

Nina inclined her head, conscious she could hear Minnie and Aunt Caroline speaking in hushed conversation behind her. The walkway crackled under her shoes, and ahead of her a pair of footmen stood by the door of the house, dressed in the livery of the Governor's staff: green and gold herringbone with polished flint buttons. Their hair was tied back with charcoal coloured ribbons, their expressions were locked in neutral.

And at Nina's approach, they snapped to movement and swung the doors wide.

"Stay with me, dear, or you'll get lost," Minnie said.

The music hadn't begun yet and Nina didn't have time to appreciate the scale of the place before her cousin swept her through the crowds to the powder room.

The room was thick with other women, a mass of them pressing in towards the vanity counters arranged at the far end. There was a smell of rich eau de cologne mixed with the earthy, sweet smell of all the crop varieties and the room roared with competing conversation.

Again, the variety of the guests impressed her. She watched as the other women fought to secure a spot at the mirrors, where they patted their hair and re-tied ribbons, inspecting themselves critically for any sign their journeys had diminished their preparatory work. They were dark and fair, old and young; their crops were wide and diverse. Many were growing simple button mushrooms like hers, but others were cultivating toadstools or other bell fungi. Some were covered with dense amorphous shapes which swelled across their backs like swirling, jagged fins that sloped around their shoulders; others were simply covered in light dustings of brightly coloured spores, which glittered across their backs like fish scales. The crops were bred to be sturdy but Nina was impressed how even though there were so many women squeezed in the room, everyone seemed to instinctively avoid brushing against each others' growths.

"Come," said Minnie, "let me see your crop."

It was *such* a crush, Nina felt quite overwhelmed, but she did as she was told and turned around, lifting her arms.

"May I?" Minnie said. Even though they were cousins, it was poor etiquette to touch another's crop without permission.

"Of course," Nina said.

She felt Minnie's fingers brushing across the back of her, but she couldn't tell what she was doing.

There was an excitement around her. The women in the powder room worked around each other; there was frenetic talk and laughter. From somewhere outside, Nina could hear the sound of distorted strings.

"Minnie," she said, "the music—"

"Not yet," Minnie said. "They're only tuning up."

She steered Nina towards the mirror and turned her so they could see her back.

"There," Minnie said. "How does that look?"

Nina's eyes widened. Her crop hadn't grown but there was a contrast in the colour of the bulbous shapes growing from her back that made them stand out from the paleness of her skin.

"What did you do?"

"Only powder." Minnie smiled. "You look beautiful, Nina, let's go find mama before the music begins."

A broad hallway led them to the ballroom, a sizeable space in a roughly oval shape. Like most of the buildings in the colony, the walls were cut from dark grey stone that reflected the light as though it was polished glass. The walls were hung with bright pendants, embroidered with the insignia of the top tier of the United Colonies. A square dance floor was marked out by pillars in the centre of the room, above which a great glass dome showed the shifting clouds. Beyond the dance floor, the orchestra were establishing themselves on the raised stage. Around the periphery of the room tables and chairs were gathered, and the guests had already started finding places to call their own for the evening.

Nina searched the crowds for a face she might recognise, something familiar to anchor her amongst the sea of strangers. But there were so many people, men and women, and their crops were so wide-ranging! There were varieties she had never seen before: hinge fungus, brackets, black caps, gills, chains and threads. Their colours were iridescent under the phosphor lamps, and so magnificent she felt they might overcome her simply by surrounding her.

"This way." Minnie steered her through the crowds to a table where Aunt Caroline was waiting. She was with a pair of gentlemen Nina had never seen before. The older one was stocky and plump; the mass of pink curling strips which blossomed on his back drew unfortunate attention to his receding hairline. The younger man

was taller and slimmer. When he bowed to greet Nina and her cousin, the back of his jacket opened to reveal tiers of bright yellow bracket growths.

"This is Mr Yolland," Aunt Caroline said. "He and Mr Bracewell work for the Ministry of Agriculture."

Nina held out her hand. She smiled. "Mr Yolland," she said.

The young man bowed again, took her hand and kissed it. "Miss Grey," he said. "An honour and a pleasure."

Mr Bracewell bustled him aside and took the hand Nina still held outstretched. "Miss Grey," the older man said. "Please forgive my young friend. He has no poetry. An honour! A pleasure! Such inadequate expressions when faced with a beauty such as yours."

Nina blushed; her eyes flickered back to Mr Yolland who looked amused. "Your aunt tells us you're here from the mountains, Miss Grey," he said.

Nina nodded. "Near Druenin," she said.

"Nina's father is Mr Kelvin Grey," Aunt Caroline said. "He owns the South Druenin mines."

"He doesn't own them," Nina said. "Mr Illwood is the owner, my father manages the business."

"Mr Illwood thinks very highly of him," Aunt Caroline said. "He is an elderly gentleman, and he has no kin."

"But I wouldn't presume—" Nina said.

"Nor should you," Aunt Caroline said. "That is my job and your parents'."

Nina lowered her eyes; the reprimand stung and felt unearned. She had always been brought up to be honest, but here, closer to the capital, things worked differently. In the few months she'd spent in the town, she had concluded that society spoke a dialect she had yet to master.

"And I hear this is your first harvest," Mr Yolland said, changing the subject.

Nina shot him a grateful smile. "It is."

"And how do you find it?"

"It's magical," she said.

"In Nina's family," Aunt Caroline said, "only her mother has been seeded, so this is quite the novelty for her."

Nina bit back a remark. There were others in the mountains who were seeded, but she knew how petulant that would sound if she said it out loud. Instead, she looked up at Mr Yolland. His eyes met hers and they were kind but unwavering.

"Well naturally," he said. "The dispensation for those who perform physical labour is an important one."

Mr Bracewell snorted; he'd been quiet since Nina's admission that her father's status was not quite as lofty as her aunt had advertised.

"It's a waste of valuable real estate," he said.

Mr Yolland retuned a tolerant look. It struck Nina that this must be an argument he had heard before.

"Nonsense," he said. "The energy of their labour would make their crops ripen far too early and the weight of their yield would impede their work. It's a question of balance, Mr Bracewell."

Mr Bracewell shrugged and looked out across the dance floor where the crowd continued to grow. "Well I concede that minerals are the colony's most important export," he said, turning back, his smile lodged firmly back in place. "We did try exporting crops once, remember that? A disaster, ladies, a disaster. Those in other colonies view our harvest with distaste if you can believe such a thing."

He laughed, a great booming sound that made Nina nervous.

"But then other colonies are not sterile," Mr Yolland said. "It isn't something they've ever needed to consider to be ordinary when they have acres of farmland at their disposal."

Mr Bracewell made a disgusted sound.

"I should like it explained how that might be less grotesque," he said. "Growing crops in the dirt and the effluent, indeed. It's positively barbaric."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "Our ancestors understood when they came here that a new kind of farming was necessary. The ground may have been home to vegetation once, but that was a long time ago. Now there are just minerals, ores and oil. Everything that used to be alive now makes this is a richer world, Miss Grey. Our ancestors had the foresight to understand that."

He raised his glass in a solemn and private toast.

Mr Yolland looked amused, and opened his mouth to say something in reply when a bell sounded from across the room. Nina turned to see the doors at the far end open wide. The orchestra struck up the district anthem, and the guests to the harvest ball took to their feet.

Through the door came a procession. Four men carried a broad sedan between them, upon which, lying face down, was a man covered with the largest crop of bracket fungus Nina had seen so far. Great jagged shapes rose from his back in mountains of bright yellows and reds and they did not stop at his back but seemed to cover every inch of him. It was only by looking closely that she could see a face amongst all the brightly coloured growth.

She glanced at Minnie for confirmation.

"The Governor," Minnie said.

"A good man," Bracewell added.

The sedan was set down at the front of the room and upon it the Governor wilted a little until one of his entourage propped him upright.

Beneath the rising tide of bright fungal growth the Governor nodded his head once, and at this signal the music picked up and the harvest dance began.

Nina had been to dances in the mountains of course – they took place in the union hut behind the mine workers' mess – and while she adored them, they were informal, and their scale was so much smaller than this evening's entertainment. It was no wonder that Minnie and Aunt Caroline had considered them rather parochial when they'd arrived by carriage to collect her all those months ago. If nothing else, there was no real *purpose* to them. The harvest ball at the Governor's house felt as though it had meaning behind it. All these people! All these crops! There was enough food in the room to feed the community for months and the sense that she was contributing gave Nina an enormous sense of pride.

Mr Yolland offered her his hand for the first dance. The music swelled around them and Nina was quite taken away by it.

"How does it compare to the mountains?" Mr Yolland said, as they circled past the dais where the Governor rested.

"It doesn't," Nina said, the colours whorling around her. "It's a whole other, wonderful thing."

Mr Yolland laughed and Nina was spinning again. He caught her, steering her with a blithe confidence she wondered if he was aware of anymore. She followed his lead. At first, she felt she was too preoccupied remembering the steps she had learned at the academy, but together, the movement, the colours and the music combined to bleach such *process* from her mind. She felt herself existing solely in the present and it was so exhilarating that when the music finally concluded with a spirited flourish, she felt as though it had been ripped away from her. She tottered slightly and, although Yolland caught her, she felt like a fool.

Her second dance was with a serious looking young fellow whose jacket was open along the arms and shoulders, beneath which vivid blue hinges grew like epaulettes.

"Quite a good floor isn't it?" Nina said and the man agreed.

"Best in the county," he said, but he didn't say much else.

Nina didn't mind. The man, handsome though he was, was a vehicle to her and nothing more. He guided her through the turbulence of the dance floor, but both were under the spell of the music.

Nina felt like she was caught in a broiling river, her speed and movement guided by unseen currents far too powerful for her to resist.

The music slowed and she glanced across the floor at the other dancers. Beside her, an elderly lady, her back shining with glittering purple barbs, was steered past by a white haired man whose back was hunched beneath the weight of dark green, fibrous leaves. The lady's face was tight with concentration, as though every movement was an effort.

"Does everyone dance?" Nina said. "Some people seem so very old. They must be tired." She recalled how in the Union Hall the older people would sit around the edges of the room, watching the revellers from behind their black-boned fans.

Her dance partner frowned. "It's the harvest ball," he said. "Of course everyone must dance.

We expend energy and adrenaline so our crops will be at their very best when the Cultivators gather them from us."

He pushed her away from him a little so he could study her.

"It is a curious question," he said.

Nina felt her cheeks reddening. "It's my first harvest ball," she said. "I'm down from the mountains. When we dance back home it is for the music, for the joy of it…"

She tailed off, quite ashamed of herself.

The man looked away again; he turned her stiffly across the dance floor.

"What a ghastly waste of time," he said.

In the doorways around the ballroom, the Cultivators were standing, watching and waiting. They wore long, yellow mackintoshes that shone under the light from the chandeliers. Their goggles hung on straps around their necks and their scarf-filters were loose over their noses and mouths. The crops had been engineered so spores would only take root in their allotted hosts, but there were always stories where something had gone wrong and these days all sensible precautions were taken.

On the dais at the head of the room, the Governor had hauled himself to his feet and was twitching to the music like a palsied marionette, his movement impeded by the sheer weight of his crop. But he hammered his foot to the ground as best as he could to keep time with the orchestra, his face turned to the ceiling as though his dance was an ecstatic one.

Like each of his guests, the Governor would be harvested that night, but only once his dance was done.

The dancing continued and Nina was taken by it. She began to lose all concept of time and she almost believed she could have danced forever if the music played likewise.

But the music stopped between dances, and as the revellers parted Nina found a little space near one of the pillars to get her breath back.

She glanced around at the crowds rushing about, and found herself curiously paranoid that she would not find a partner for the next dance.

At the back of the hall, she saw the Cultivators had started working, siphoning off dancers whose crops they judged to have ripened to their satisfaction, and leading them through the doors to an adjoining theatre. Nina could see others returning, their jackets buttoned down, the backs of their dresses tied up with ribbons to the nape of their necks.

She saw the Governor talking to one of his staff. A shake of the head; he wasn't done yet.

"Miss Grey, may I?" A voice spoke up to her left and relief flooded her. But when she turned, she was a little disappointed to see it was the plump figure of Mr Bracewell who had spoken. His hand was outstretched, and he was standing, half bowed, as though he was presenting himself to her, his baldness first.

Nina recomposed herself. "But of course, Mr Bracewell," she said. "I'd be delighted."

She took his hand and allowed him to lead her into the throng.

Despite both appearance and manner, Mr Bracewell proved himself to be more than competent on the dance floor. They turned around its periphery as though it were a carousel, and although Nina found herself adjusting her pace to compensate for the shortness of her partner's legs, she realised she was enjoying herself again.

"So how do you find your first harvest?" Mr Bracewell said.

"It really is magical," Nina said, wishing she could come up with a word that sounded less trite.

"Somewhat different, I would imagine, from the dances you must have attended up in the mountains."

"Very different." Nina smiled. "So many colours. So many people."

"And your family are still there? Left behind?"

Nina frowned. "Well, yes, but it was good for me to come to the town. To be seeded, to be part of society—"

Mr Bracewell laughed. "When I was a young man," he said, "thirty years ago, maybe more, I would pride myself on being the last to be Cultivated at the harvest dance. I would dance on and on into the night, and the dance floor would empty and the walls would become lined with those whose crops had been harvested, and

those who were just tired and waiting for the feast to begin."

Nina smiled sympathetically. "I'm sure you were a marvellous dancer," she said. "I'm sure you could still be the last on the dance floor if you wished."

Mr Bracewell shook his head a fraction, his smile wistful. "No," he said. "That youth of mine is gone. That's what youth does. It leaves. Just as you left your home in the mountains for a better life in the town, just as the colonists left the Old World all those generations ago to set up their own, better places. The young of us set out, to seed new places, to produce crops that will be harvested, to dance until the end of the night. It is a rare sort of youth which spares a thought for those of us left behind."

There was no bitterness in his tone, just a thin edge of sadness which, small though it was, felt at odds with the atmosphere of the ball.

Nina frowned. Her concentration gone, her rhythm went with it and she missed a step with an awful, clumsy clacking sound as her shoes struck the beautifully polished floor flat-footed. Disorientated, she pitched forwards, but Mr Bracewell caught her before she could fall. Close now, she could smell the sour sweat of him; she struggled away in revulsion but he held her tight.

"Sometimes," he said, "I look up to the stars and wonder how far we have progressed. Seeding our kind through the heavens like a fungal bloom. And I imagine the stars blinking out one by one as we pass across them like a shadow."

She felt his hand snake around her waist, his fingers pressing themselves to her back. Her eyes widened in horror as she felt him search out and then pluck a mushroom from the low reaches of her crop. With it, she felt a small convulsion run up her spine, a jolt of inexplicable pleasure, as though the lightest of feathers had drawn a delicate path down the small of her back. She struggled free and scowled at her partner.

Around her, the music and the dancing continued, perfectly blind to her own little drama.

Mr Bracewell was smiling, and Nina didn't like his smile at all.

"You really mustn't take me seriously, you know," he said.

Nina inclined her head. "Excuse me," she said. "I need some air."

She pushed her way through the still-crowded dance-floor and out of the hall.

She was not alone on the veranda; a few couples had retreated outside to engage in quiet discussion. Some who had already been harvested were there too, enjoying the comparative calm and looking across the town spread out below. They had covered their backs to hide the marks the harvest left behind, but they looked flushed and satisfied with the night.

Nina leaned on the balustrade and surveyed the view. In the dark, she had to imagine its geometry. She knew the town spread down towards the plain, where it hugged the bank of the outflow river, but her view was limited to disparate, greenish pools cast by phosphor lanterns. With the ball so full, she wondered who might be left in the town. Manual workers, of course, and those on the alternate cycle, seeded only two months ago, their own ball would be later in the year.

She looked up to the sky, straining her eyes to make out the pin-prick stars scattered above them. She tried to understand what Mr Bracewell had been talking about, but concluded he made no sense at all and that he was a miserable little man who simply wanted to ruin her mood.

"There you are." Minnie joined her at the balustrade and looked outwards. "I think I prefer the view in the dark," she said. "Black mountains, black landscape, black river, black sky. At least the lights are beautiful."

She turned to Nina and smiled.

"Mama thought we might have lost you," she said.

"No," Nina said. She sighed. "If the whole planet is so dead and ashen and sterile, do you ever wonder why we stay?"

Minnie smiled and turned back to the view. "Do you miss the mountains?" she said. "The real ones, I mean. Not these bumps we have here. I enjoyed my trip to your home, you know. It's always good to see more of the world. And the mountains! Oh, the mountains. They were beautiful, in their way. Beautiful and quite frightening."

Nina shook her head but didn't respond.

"Come here," Minnie said. She turned Nina by the shoulders and inspected her crop. "You should maybe take another dance and then they'll be ready for you."

"I think I'm done with dancing for the night," Nina said.

"Well, I'm sure Mr Yolland will be very disappointed to hear it."

Nina turned, wide eyed. Minnie smiled broadly.

From inside, the music came to a halt and Nina heard the crowd applaud loudly with enthusiasm.

"The Governor," Minnie said. "He's leaving the dance floor to be harvested."

"He lasted longer than I expected."

"He's a good man," Minnie said. "And so is Mr Yolland, if you don't dawdle."

"Why? What did he say?"

Minnie shrugged. "He didn't say anything, but I saw the way he watched as you ran away from Mr Bracewell."

Nina blushed. "I didn't run away," she said.

"Well, don't tell him that," Minnie said. "Some men simply adore rescuing helpless women."

"I'm not helpless!"

"Well of course you aren't, but don't tell him that either."

Nina laughed, sharply and suddenly enough to draw a look from the nearby couple on the veranda. "Does Barnabas think you're helpless?" she said.

Minnie's smile faltered a little. "Sometimes." She turned away from her cousin and stared out at the chains of distant lights. In an involuntary movement, she reached behind her, tracing the path of her spine as though she expected a crop to be growing there.

Nina glanced at the hall and the music cast out for her, budding a seed of impatience that made her shuffle her feet. "I should go back," she said.

Minnie turned back and she brought her smile with her. "Do," she said. She reached across and pushed a stray hair away from her cousin's face. "And you're wrong about the planet being dead and ashen. It is beautiful. It is fertile. We make it what it is. That's why we're here."

She smiled, but it was a sad smile which made Nina linger a moment. Minnie made a shooing motion with her hands.

"Go on," she said. "He's waiting."

At the end of the hall, the staff had begun to lay out the buffet for the evening. A string of tables had been set up along the back wall, and already there were plates of brightly coloured foods: mushrooms in all shapes and sizes, steaks of bracket fungus, salads of hair-like growth. A procession of serving staff dressed in black and white carried plates of sweetbreads and tureens of richly scented soup, spiced with the piquant varieties of powder spores.

The dance floor had thinned since Nina had last seen it, and the Cultivators had been busy, with many more people lined around the room, gathered at tables, and waiting at chairs. The murmur of conversation was mounting from the harvested guests, and threatened to overwhelm the music.

Nina saw Aunt Caroline sitting at one of the tables, but Mr Yolland intercepted before she could reach her.

His timing couldn't have been more perfect. The orchestra concluded one song, and the conductor was already tapping his baton against his music stand, a shift in key signature, a gentle percussion and then the strings swelled at his command. Then came the horns and then the slow and delicate piano melody filled the room like the sun on a spring morning.

And Mr Yolland bowed his head and asked Nina for the dance.

They spun orbits around the dance floor, the music sent them away, then drew them back. The other dancers began to drift from the floor as the Cultivators led them away one-by-one. But Nina wasn't ready to go. She was too busy dancing. She would dance until the end of the night if the music would let her; she would dance until the end of the world.

If they wanted her, they would have to wait their turn.

Malcolm Devlin's first two stories appeared in *Black Static* (#38) and *Interzone* (#255). This is his third, unless the story due to appear in the anthology *Aickman's Heirs* (Undertow Publications) comes out first, in which case he'll have to recount.

BOOK ZONE

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plus interview

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THE SILENCE
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THOSE ABOVE
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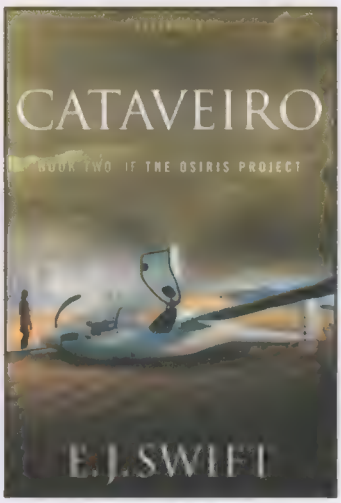


TAMARUQ
E.J. Swift
Del Rey pb, 432pp, £8.99

E.J. Swift's *Osiris* (2012) portrayed a society whose rulers apparently gloried in their own insularity, while concealing a truly shocking secret. This inward-turning was reflected in the novel's intricately wrought prose, which seemed to physically resist the reader's attempts to engage, as well as in the claustrophobic imagery Swift used. The divide between the haves – the ruling elite of Osiris – and the have-nots, the refugees who had arrived there in the wake of one ecological catastrophe too many – was enacted in the division of the city into quarters, but manifest too in the relationship between Adelaide Rechnov, daughter of an elite family, and Vikram Bai, an activist from the other side of the city.

Last year's *Cataveiro* ejected us into the outside world, with its dizzyingly open spaces, more freedom than the average Osirian could ever imagine. Again, the writing reflected this in images that seemed almost to burn the eyes, they were so bright. And yet, as the reader quickly came to realise, the world beyond Osiris had precisely the same set of problems, only writ much larger, its protagonists more anonymous, hiding behind intermediaries. Because Osiris was, of course, always a microcosm of that outside world.

Cataveiro explored this from several perspectives. Vikram, only survivor of an Osirian expedition to Patagonia, found himself on the run from the Patagonian authorities, eager to make political capital out of his arrival, and befriended by Taeo Ybanez, hoping to use Vikram as a way to facilitate his own return to Antarctica. Through their eyes the reader saw life as

E.J. SWIFT: THE WALLS OF THE WORLD

Review & interview by Maureen Kincaid Speller

it was experienced by most of Patagonia's inhabitants – brutal and repressive. And yet, knowing there was a world beyond the immediate provided perhaps a little more room for hope, even though there was often little to choose between life in the western quarter of Osiris and in the slums of Cataveiro.

Ramona Callejas, self-taught pilot and cartographer, had all the space in the world, but was obliged to protect her freedom to fly by making maps for the authorities. Yet her intense scrutiny of the landscape was also directed towards protecting those communities she encountered on her journeys, and trying to protect her people as best she could. Eventually, she discovered that people were being kidnapped and taken north, including her own mother. This prompted her to follow the people traffickers, hoping to rescue her mother and find out what was happening.

Having shifted from the microscopic focus of *Osiris* to the wide-angle lens of *Cataveiro*, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Tamaruq*, the final volume of The Osiris Project, takes a different narrative approach again. Necessary, too, given that there are now so many different perspectives in play, so many 'voices' clamouring to be heard. Vikram is even more interesting to the authorities now that he has survived, inexplicably, redfleur, the Ebola-like disease ravaging the world. Ramona has found her way onto a cargo ship where the abductees are being held. And Adelaide Rechnov has survived near-drowning and intense psychological distress, only to find herself in the hands of the would-be revolutionaries. More unexpectedly, she has finally realised that she can indeed find common cause with them.

This time the novel is a-flutter with pieces of information, from sources of all kinds. Alongside the narratives of Ramona, Vikram and Adelaide, there are extracts from correspondence and radio messages, as well as lengthy extracts from the journal kept by a researcher into redfleur, working at Tamaruq, a research station in the Alaskan desert. This last is discovered by Ramona when she breaches the station's security, finds out what is actually going on there, and uncovers a link to Osi-

ris. It's tempting to suppose we're seeing the story from the point of view of the enigmatic Alaskan, whose presence formed the core of *Cataveiro* and, it seems likely, will perform a similar function in this novel. If the others are hesitantly recovering knowledge, the Alaskan, cybernetically enhanced, and an inveterate gatherer of information, already seems to know the answer to what is going on, and is now merely seeking confirmation. By ensuring that the various protagonists at last find their ways back to Osiris, she is in a position to orchestrate the final confrontation between the various world powers, the city's rulers and the downtrodden inhabitants of the western quarter. This is a particularly shocking moment of uncertainty in a novel which has perhaps set us up to hope that there might finally be a happy ending. Which is not to say that there isn't, but it is not necessarily what one might expect.

If the plot seems messy, this is not because of a lack of control in Swift's writing. Instead, we are witnessing the messiness of real life turned into fiction. The problem, if there is one, is people, who decline to perform as narrative genre expectation demands they should. Instead human concerns drive the storytelling. This has been emphasised throughout the series, as characters react against being treated as mere gaming pieces. If Adelaide could not see actual human beings until it was almost too late, Ramona, by contrast, has been acutely aware of every individual she has met in her travels, and of the personal consequences of decisions taken elsewhere. Vikram, self-contained as he is, has survived by caring about people *en masse*, but in the end, he also realises that it must be about the individual.

Striking too is the way in which the reader can never see the entire story at once. At the beginning of *Osiris* Adelaide assumed her brother Axel had been murdered or kidnapped, abandoning her search for an explanation only when something more compelling came along. And here too we are left with fragments of story, things that are not neatly tied off. This might be indicative of the narrative overflowing the trilogy, but Swift seems to be suggesting instead that some stories must inevitably be overwhelmed by others. This is how we survive, in spite of everything.

"I think science fiction gives a freedom to explore some of the issues surrounding contemporary conflicts, without the anxiety of misrepresenting a particular culture or society"

I was struck by the way you explore the regime in *Osiris*, and later, in the wider world, from the inside out. The reader only gradually comes to understand what's going on. Was that your choice from the outset?

When I first wrote *Osiris* it was a standalone novel, but I did have a clear concept of the world beyond the city, particularly the political rift between north and south and the impact of climate change on the environment. Osiris is such an isolated, claustrophobic setting that, for my own sanity, I wanted to explore new territory when it came to *Cataveiro*. Once I had a sense of where the trilogy was heading, I knew I wanted to open out the viewpoints with each novel, so *Osiris* is restricted to Adelaide's and Vikram's perspectives, and by *Tamaruq* I have characters ranging from Alaska to Antarctica.

If *Osiris* began as a stand-alone, how and why did it become a trilogy? And does this mean there may be more?

By the time *Osiris* was ready to submit to agents, I was thinking more strategically about where it might fit in the market. I deliberately left the novel open-ended because I had an inkling I'd be asked about sequels – which was pretty much how it panned out. Trilogies and series seem to be the standard, particularly for debut writers.

But I don't have plans for any more, certainly not for now! I would love to do a collection of linked stories that span the centuries before and after the events of The Osiris Project, but I suspect that's more a labour of love than a commercial prospect.

I'm fascinated by the psychology underpinning all three novels, the shifts between confinement and freedom. Could you say more about that?

With *Osiris* I had a strong sense of place right from the start. The environment and repressive regime supported one another: the ocean infiltrates society at every level and acts as a jailor, mentally and physically, as much as the authorities do. In *Cataveiro* I wanted to explore the opposite, the sense of mystery and possibility offered by the unknown. Those characters, perhaps more than others in the trilogy, have the freedom to choose their own lives, even if they are shackled by resource, climate, and (beyond Patagonia) by borders. Then in *Tamaruq* I was interested in the way society can appear to promote freedom, until you find the walls, which is what happens to Shri. It was about showing contrast, really – there are so many post-apocalyptic stories out there and I tried to do something slightly different with each book.

The growth of freedom seems to be reflected in the language/imagery you're using. Is this self-conscious?

For me those decisions are more instinctive than conscious, at least initially. When I'm writing a first draft a lot of connections occur subconsciously, and it's only after I have the full manuscript that I have a picture of what the novel's about, and then I can go back and tease out themes or ideas.

In *Tamaruq* you used such a wide range of narrative techniques – letters, diaries, and so on. Does that reflect a further opening out?

Yes, it was deliberate. It was a way of broadening the perspectives of the novel and showing the conflicting perceptions of different cultures – and also of dealing with the sheer breadth of storylines, geographically and politically. And I wanted to challenge myself on a technical level. I always enjoy writing first person, so the diary sequences in *Tamaruq* were actually some of the easiest passages to write, and they were finalised fairly early on.

It's obvious that you're drawing on contemporary examples of political ghettoising and the zealous maintenance of borders. Is it easier to explore such issues through science fiction?

Definitely. I think science fiction gives a freedom to explore some of the issues surrounding contemporary conflicts, without the anxiety of misrepresenting a particular culture or society. I didn't have a specific example in mind when writing the trilogy, but inevitably I've been influenced by current events. I also wanted to explore the impact of climate change on exacerbating these tensions. With such a clearly global threat I think science fiction can have an important role to play in drawing attention to the potential consequences of inaction.

I wonder how other political situations are affected by or reflect changes in climate.

I can't answer this without mentioning Mark Lynas's *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet*, which was my bible when I first conceptualised the world of The Osiris Project. Lynas explores some of the geopolitical consequences of climate change, and the ways in which they are inextricably linked. Essentially, climate change impacts on resources and

habitable environments which impacts on migration and border controls and political systems. I'm really interested to read Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* this summer which sounds like it's going to explore exactly that territory in a near-future setting.

I'm also interested in what you've done with 'recovered knowledge'. In McCaffrey's stories, for instance, they were always recovering civilisation whole, whereas you have a broad series of responses that seems to me to be exploring the choices we make about technologies.

There were two reasons for this. Technology is progressing so fast that it feels almost impossible to predict, and I didn't want to depict a level of technology that could feel outdated in just a few years.

Linked to that, I find it fascinating and terrifying how we simply accept (or capitalism imposes) that technology equals progress, often without consideration to the consequences on our physical and mental wellbeing. It's only now that studies are revealing the changes that 24/7 connectivity is making to our neurochemistry, our levels of focus and attention. So, in *Cataveiro*, I wanted to depict a society that rejects technology to the point where its citizens find electronic devices physically nauseating, while Antarctica and the Boreal States are locked in a technological arms race. Also, if technology had resulted in the near-extinction of the human race, it seemed logical that some, if not all societies would question the wisdom of resurrecting that knowledge. And of course it's fun to play with the reactions to those attitudes when characters from opposing worlds collide.

ejswift.co.uk

TOUCH
Claire North
Orbit hb, 432pp, £14.99

Ian Sales

Catherine Webb began publishing YA novels in 2002. She has since written a fantasy series for adults under the name Kate Griffin, and two SF novels as Claire North: *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, published in 2014, and now *Touch*.

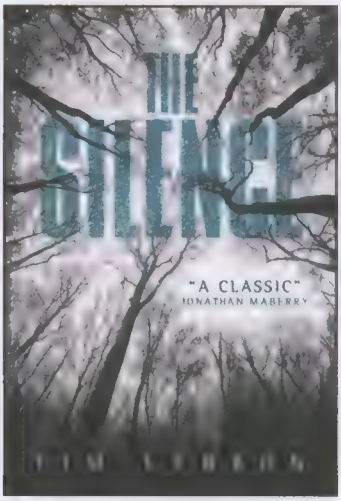
Kepler is a "ghost". Ghosts exist in those moments when people suffer short fugue states, or operate on "automatic pilot" – everyone has done something like this, perhaps arrived home with no memory of the journey – and North does a very clever job in making such an outlandish premise appear plausible. After dying a violent death centuries earlier, Kepler discovered he could "occupy" another person's body, although none of these hosts remembered what happened to them. Kepler, of course, is not a "he", having lived in thousands of bodies of both genders. But given that Kepler spends much of *Touch* controlling a man named Nathan, it seems fair to use the male pronoun.

On occasion, ghosts – Kepler is not the only one – do deals for other ghosts, and occupy bodies, with or without permission, for extended periods. Kepler used to facilitate this, and was known as an "estate agent". One of his less successful arrangements involved a ghost taking over Marilyn Monroe, one of many nice touches found in the novel.

It is the death of a host which kicks off the plot. The aforementioned Nathan is an assassin. He tries to kill Kepler, but Kepler manages to escape – yet Nathan still murders Kepler's host, Josephine. Angered, upset and puzzled, Kepler seizes control of Nathan, and over the course of the novel learns of an organisation, Aquarius, dedicated to eradicating the ghosts. But Aquarius may have been infiltrated by Galileo, a psychopathic ghost known to Kepler.

The concept around which the story of *Touch* is based is fascinating, and North's handling of it is assured and well thought-out. So it's a shame that, like her previous novel, the story North tells using this conceit feels too weak to carry the premise's weight. Kepler investigates Aquarius, with many flashbacks to explain his relationship with Galileo and other ghosts, only to learn it's all a plot by Galileo. It feels strangely banal. The novel seems hollow, as though the novum which made sense of everything in it were missing. No rationale, for example, is given for the ghosts.

Having said that, *Touch* is far from a bad book. It's a polished piece of SF, with very readable prose. Kepler is a sympathetic narrator, and the notion of swapping bodies through touch is very cleverly worked out. And yet there's that fade as the novel approaches its end, and it seems such a shame given the carefulness with which North has deployed *Touch*'s central premise. For that reason, I suspect it will not be as successful as *The First Fifteen of Lives of Harry August*.



THE SILENCE
Tim Lebbon
Titan Books pb, 359pp, £7.99

John Howard

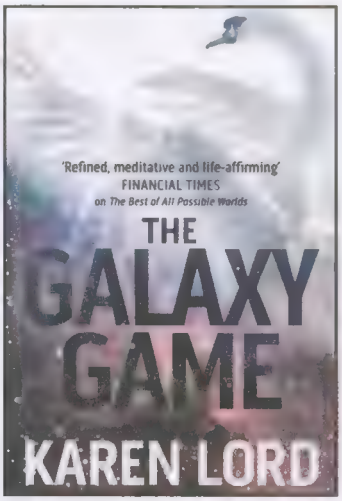
It's November 2016 and fourteen-year-old Ally is at home fighting off her irritating younger brother while keeping in touch with friends via social media and thinking about boys (or a certain one). Oh, and Ally is profoundly deaf, the result of a car accident some years before – a tragedy which still causes guilt and sorrow to the family. Otherwise, as part of an ordinary family from an ordinary town, who get on as best they can, Ally also lives in an imposed world of silence, lip-reading and sign language. It turns out to be good preparation for them all.

For what is happening at exactly the same time as the sibling squabbling is about to utterly change the world. In Moldova a tremendous contained cave system has been discovered and is slowly being explored. Down there it's a kind of *The Lost World*, with new species of flora and fauna coming to light – literally – all the time. And then the emergence from the ancient darkness of ravenous eyeless *things* is caught on live camera, the video images sent out across a shocked and uncomprehending world before screens go blank. Confused reports start coming in. Millions of leathery bat-like, rat-like *things* with teeth that piranhas would scarcely find fit for purpose overrun south-eastern Europe and western Russia within hours. Romanians call the creatures *viespi* (wasps) – a misnomer that sticks. The 'vesps' are attracted by noise: attacking and killing anyone and anything that makes a sound. And they reproduce.

Soon only a few isolated individuals and groups who have stayed silent are left alive. And it's only hours before the tide of vesps will reach the doubtful obstacle of the English Channel. Narrated by Ally with sections told from the viewpoint of her father Huw, *The Silence* focuses on one family and their response to the danger. Their plight is compared and contrasted with the flood of bloody revelation pouring from the internet. Weaving the threads of a disaster novel by adopting a large number of viewpoints or an omniscient author are time-honoured methods, but technology allows the action and effects to concentrate, as here, on the small-scale and local as well as the large-scale and global. As the vesps sweep across Europe, the family figure their chances of survival would be increased if they could get to a remote part of the country, where it would be as quiet as possible. There's a place in Scotland that would fit the bill – and so the trek begins.

Society seems as yet little affected as they drive north. On the journey there are some standard SF-panic-disaster-novel set pieces, underlining the brutality and heroism of people under pressure and facing almost certain death as time runs out. There is a familiar feel in much of what happens throughout *The Silence*: a coming home, almost – even as Lebbon undermines the concept of 'home', and its re-achieving seems unlikely at best. The challenges have been made and taken up before, and a procession of remembered novels and stories parades past. And it is easy to invoke the memorable but rather too glib label of 'cosy catastrophe': the catastrophe being what amounts to an alien invasion and the very probable downfall of humanity hold on the planet. But… Yes, here, the family are ordinary and middle class – even so, we *really are* all in this one together. Here, as in Wellsville, Nevilshuteton, Upper Wyndham, Great Herbert-upon-Gloom – or anywhere else on the much-consulted and crowded old map – it *is* catastrophe, and not at all cosy (as if most of those other ones in the parade had been anyway).

The Silence could so easily have been titled *The* [insert name/type of monster]. Instead we're given not merely the threat or doom, but the result and solution. A new world demands a new rule – which all must learn and live by for every moment. There will be adaptation and compromise, whether a slow, drawing-out of the disaster or a pause before the time to fight back truly arrives. (Again, that parade of titles.) In the growing winter gloom the adapting does begin, as the running-down, the switching-off, the fading-out starts to swallow all. But right at the bottom (where it's had to be silent and grown used to it) there's the 'h' word waiting there patiently after all. It's been one hell of a journey, in one hell too, but outside there are survivors. Huddle, gesture, scrawl, huddle. *The Silence* isn't (or won't be) Tim Lebbon's best novel, but it is one for dark frights and bleak entertainment, pushing as it does all those buttons in right and practised order. And out of the silence there is still the inescapable question: what would I do?



THE GALAXY GAME
Karen Lord
Jo Fletcher Books pb, 336pp, £8.99

Stephen Theaker

Rafi Abowen Delarua, Moo to his friends, also known as Rafidelarua, lives on the planet Cygnus Beta. For the last year he has attended the Tlaxce National Lyceum, and he's getting bored, even though it's a school for training "rogue and random psi gifted" to use their powers wisely. He is only fourteen when the book begins, but everyone is worried about him: his notorious father was immensely powerful, and did not use his powers for good.

Staff at the Lyceum leverage Rafi's interest in the sport of wallrunning to persuade him to wear a cap, which will let them monitor the development of his powers more closely. The results are worrying: his psi powers manifest when he dreams about sex, and the dreams come with "a truly astonishing amount of fear". He sneaks away from school over the weekend, and heads offworld, to the planet Punartam, where he'll wallrun for shady Baranngaithe.

The galactic background to all of this is that the planet Sadira was devastated by a surprise biological attack, leaving "its biosphere locked in toxic regeneration for centuries to come" and its people scattered. Old Sadira had been the "leader of the galaxy…or at least policeman and judge and occasional executioner", in part thanks to the psychic abilities of its people. Their absence from galactic affairs leaves a power vacuum and opportunities for the ruthless.

The government of New Sadira is desperate to bring female survivors to their new world. As a result "Sadiri women are now the galaxy's rarest and most valuable commodity", whether they like it or not, including those in a community of Sadiri recently established on Cygnus Beta. Meanwhile, Terra is out there, until now cut off from all these shenanigans, to allow us time to reach full maturity. The myths claim that endangered branches of humanity were brought long ago from Earth to Cygnus Beta to thrive in safety.

This was a disappointing book for reasons that are a bit difficult to explain: it has what should be a satisfying array of mysteries, interplanetary politics, future sports, and interesting societal structures. Being lost for the first tenth of it didn't help. The prologue is five thousand words long, a flood of information that simply serves to obscure the book's main plot: a boy who leaves his home planet to play sports just as the galaxy gets crazy; it's like the beginning of the Alan Smithee *Dune*, if each planet had names in three different languages.

That's not the only aspect of the book that felt unnecessarily obfuscatory and foggy. For example, certain passages about a minor supporting character, Ntenman, and only him, are in the first person. The novel explains itself as a compilation of information recovered from datachips, audioplugs, data vaults and filigree, so perhaps the in-story explanation is there, but why him and no one else? It leads to the confusing assumption that he will be much more important to the plot than he really is.

Stories of future sports can be thrilling – they feature for example in Ben Bova's *The Duelling Machine* and Jack Vance's *Trullion: Alastor 2262* – but wallrunning doesn't sound particularly compelling. Two teams must run from the bottom of a wall to the top, guided by a strategist's signals, conveyed through grav-bands on their wrists. Rafi plays as a booby, a deliberately useless player who lets everyone else practise how to handle team-mates' mistakes. His skills don't improve, but the teams around him do, almost preternaturally so.

Though the walls can sometimes be tilted by the players' concerted movements, and some courses feature gravity twists, it sounds pretty much like bulldog's charge with everyone running in the same direction, which is hard to imagine being much fun to play or watch. That the sport is also known as Forerunner is perhaps too big a clue to where the book will take it, and this heavy-handed hint is offered long before the reader has had a chance to start caring about the sport or its secret purpose.

Maybe that is what makes it a hard book to like: it assumes from the beginning that the reader is fully invested, in all its information, in all its characters and planets, in their multitude of names, in everything it wants to say. The plot takes a while to get going, and starts winding down with a quarter of the book still to go. However, the plot pieces do fall into place neatly towards the end, and a later scene where Rafi watches Dllenahkh, a Sadiri, return briefly to his home planet was extremely moving.

THOSE ABOVE
Daniel Polansky
Hodder & Stoughton pb, 410pp, £8.99

Peter Loftus

Three thousand years ago they came to enslave humanity, enforcing their will with fire and the sword. Beautiful, terrible and near immortal, they rule from glittering palaces in the eternal city at the centre of the world. They are known as Those Above by their subjects. Twenty-five years before the narrative begins, mankind rose against these oppressors. Many were slain in the ensuing battle that signalled the death of mankind's hopes. Now, however, discontent is rife and whispers of rebellion are heard once again. Thus begins Book One of Daniel Polansky's Empty Throne series.

It is obvious from the opening lines that *Those Above* is every inch a modern fantasy novel. For a start, Polansky has chosen to tell his story from the perspective of multiple protagonists, a trick that owes as much to TV shows like *The Wire* as it does to a certain other fantasy franchise that has made it to the small screen and mainstream acceptance in recent years. One feature of this approach is the use of morally ambivalent characters who work to private agendas or have their own individualistic take on ethics. *Those Above* has no shortage of such characters.

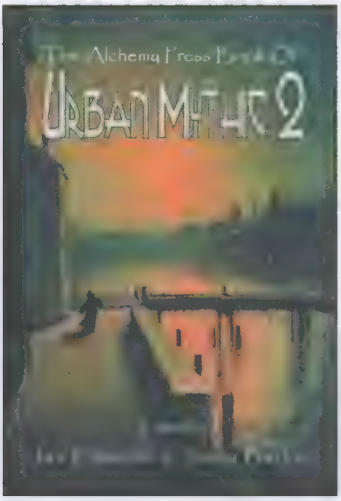
First up is grizzled veteran Bas, leading his forces against the assembled Marcher horde. Then we have the Reverend Mother Eudokia, scheming to maintain her place in the grand scheme of things. Next up is Calla, a highly placed servant of the superhuman masters and our window into doings at the highest strata. On the lowest rung of society is street urchin Thistle, living on his wits to make it from one day to the next. Despite the best efforts of the author, none of these characters comes across as original and there is very little about any of them to engage the reader's interest or sympathies. Bas is good to watch in a fight and Thistle piques a quantum of interest, but overall not enough to warrant a recommendation. On reflection, the Thistle character seems to be a rather uninspired redrafting of a new staple of modern fantasy. Where years ago we had a kitchen boy or woodcutter's son discovering a talent for magic or a secret lineage linked to an epic destiny, now we have a wilful pre-adolescent running wild through the filth-laden back lanes of a grimy city none of us would ever want to visit. Therein lies the first shortcoming of *Those Above*. Quite simply, the characters aren't well-realised or compelling enough for a novel-length work, let alone a longer series. Nor do they develop in any particularly rewarding way.

In truth, very little happens in any of the story arcs. Thistle comes to a point on the last page that he could easily have reached in a quarter of that time. Bas and Calla spend the entirety of the book doing not too much of anything, as does Eudokia, although at least she has the decency to have some kind of climax to her arc (also one of the book's best scenes). On top of that, as of the close of the first volume, none of the individual storylines intersect or have any influence on each other whatsoever.

While Polansky has an incontrovertible skill with language, his descriptions lack the kind of detail that would give them any sense of immediacy. Rather clunky asides in world-building, character flashbacks and generalisation exacerbate this problem. The reader never becomes absorbed to the point that they escape the outside world, or more importantly, forgets the fact that they are reading a work of fiction. The settings are bland too.

Another trademark of the modern fantasy novel seems to be an obsession with all things gritty, and Polansky takes to this with aplomb. Characters let out "wet farts", and piss proudly and openly. Unfortunately, the frequent toilet and sexual references don't add anything to the atmosphere or help to develop the plot or characters. Instead they function as cheap window dressing, a clan badge to tell readers the particular sub-genre Polansky is aiming for.

Ultimately, what *Those Above* does best is remind us that publishing is a business venture. Hodder & Stoughton must certainly have a strong enough team of readers and editors to have recognised the failings of *Those Above* as a literary undertaking. But they are no fools. They are also fully aware of what sells and have provided what amounts to an exercise in ticking the checklist for gritty contemporary fantasy. Which means that, after all is said and done, many will buy this book and many of those will enjoy it because it delivers on all of those things fantasy readers seem to crave so much of these days.



THE ALCHEMY PRESS BOOK OF URBAN MYTHIC 2
Edited by Jan Edwards & Jenny Barber
Alchemy Press pb, 254pp, £9.00

Ian Hunter

What is the difference between urban mythic and urban fantasy? Discuss. Some things that spring to mind are lurid and sensational urban legends, probably involving teenage babysitters and serial killers hiding in the back of your car. Fortunately we are not in that territory here, in this second collection of *Urban Mythic* tales, once again edited by the steady hands of Jan Edwards and Jenny Barber, and graced by a cover from Edward Miller (better known by another name, perhaps) of a docklands city scene, maybe even slightly Venetian, given all that water, and we know how sinister Venice can be. The clue is in the "mythic" part of the title as we encounter some creatures from myths and legend.

Being sinister isn't always the order of the day in this collection, but it certainly feels that way in the opening story by Tanith Lee, 'The Mermaid', which has a tenuous link with the urban world, although our narrator has escaped from the big city for a more gentle life beside the sea – or so he thinks – but, hey, it's Tanith Lee, and it's beautifully written and quite, quite shudderingly horrible.

Less horrible is K.T. Davies' 'For the Memory of Jane' which opens with some of the best writing I've read in a long time, written from the viewpoint of a certain creature from a certain mythology… What is it? Well, that would spoil the story, wouldn't it? But I thought the writing in the opening section was simply stunning.

'Where the Brass Band Plays' by Adrian Tchaikovsky is another seaside tale, although in not as remote a setting as Lee's 'The Mermaid', and Tchaikovsky's story borders on occult detective territory as our narrator is once again hired by the enigmatic, and wayward, Walthar as they investigate the disappearances of several children in a decaying seaside town. What is really enjoyable about this story is the voice, and the fact that our two heroes have clearly bitten off more than they can chew, but something would like to chew on them! More of these characters please, Adrian.

Everyone wants to be a celeb these days, and everyone wants to be famous, and with the right offerings you can be in 'How To Get Ahead in Avatising' by James Brodgen as a diva invokes a goddess to take the next step towards lasting superstardom with her future career all mapped out by a Svengali-like media mogul person who might be familiar to viewers of *Britain's Got Talent*. Naturally things don't go to plan, but then there is always Plan B up the sleeve of those in charge, and there is always someone else out there with dreams to fulfil, be they good or bad.

As mentioned before, urban mythic doesn't have to be horrific and Sarah Ash offers us a bittersweet love story in 'La Vouivre' about two people (although I'm using the term "people" loosely) looking for love; one young and inexperienced and escaping to the countryside after a break-up, and the other an immortal creature who thinks it might be time to love a mortal again, although it always ends in loneliness as their human lover inevitably ages and dies. This story is so well written you hope both of them will get together, but at what cost?

Something totally different is Marion Pitman's 'The Cupboard of Winds', when our narrator thinks she is dreaming as a voice on the radio starts talking to her and points out how draughty her house is, something she thinks is worth investigating, but she's certainly going to need to buy in more booze when she finds out what is causing those draughts. Great fun.

Almost as gentle a story is Pauline E. Dungate's 'Trapped in the Web' as a black musician starts feeling uneasy upstairs on the night bus when he is travelling home from gigs. The clue is in the title, especially when a fellow passenger is touched by something and our hero gets taken away by the police for questioning, or worse given he is black. My only quibble with the story is that it could have been even creepier.

Like the Tchaikovsky story, another world I'd like to see more of is that of Andrew Coulthard's 'Paradise Walk' which appears at first to be about warring families from the Old Country struggling to fit into city life, but they are more than they seem. It reminded me slightly of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and even more so of some of Ray Bradbury's short stories, which can be no bad thing. More from you too, Andrew – maybe in *Urban Mythic 3*, perhaps?

WHERE
Kit Reed
Tor hb, 240pp, $25.99

Paul Kincaid

If ever a character in a novel ends up spending all or most of a book in a white room, beware. Such featureless settings are usually an anteroom to death or, more often, a metaphor for the inside of the writer's mind. Whichever it might be, such works are generally well-worn and uninteresting. But Kit Reed doesn't do well-worn or uninteresting, so when a bunch of her characters are suddenly transported to an all-white landscape we start to wonder what might be at stake here.

The answer is certainly not death, but rather, more subtly and far more interestingly, absence. This is a theme that has become central to her work. Read through the stories gathered in her superb career retrospective collection *The Story Until Now* and you can hardly move for characters who have somehow stepped outside of their lives, absented themselves from the world. In the story 'Military Secrets' (reprinted as an addendum to this novel) the theme is once again at the heart of the fiction. The narrator is a schoolgirl whose father is reported missing in action during the Second World War, an absence that has a devastating effect upon her mother, though at first we don't quite realise how badly the girl herself is affected. At school, she and two others are separated from their classmates and directed onto a bus that is already crowded with grey, silent children. As the bus pulls away through an unseen landscape, we discover that all of the children on the bus have a parent missing in action, but all from different wars.

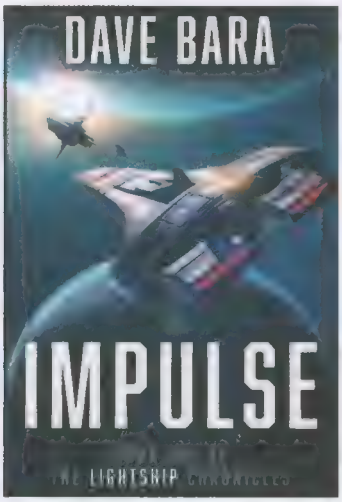
In terms of plot, character, tone or setting, 'Military Secrets' has absolutely no connection with the novel *Where*, but thematically the two are inextricably linked.

Where is set very precisely on an island in the Outer Carolina Banks. Here David Ribault runs an architecture business in the township of Kraventown, and lives with Merrill Poulnot though he hasn't quite got around to proposing marriage yet and the relationship is starting to grow a little stale. Then a slick northerner, Rawson Steele, shows up and drives a wedge between the two, and before David can patch up the argument he has to leave for an early-morning meeting with Steele off the island. Except Steele doesn't show up, and when David tries to return home, he finds it cordoned off. At some point during the morning, every single person in Kraventown disappeared.

Meanwhile, Merrill wakes up, with everyone else from the town, in the middle of a desert settlement. Here, everyone has a house that mirrors the one they had in Kraventown, except that the buildings are all white, the interiors are all white, the furnishings are all white, even the clothes that are provided are all white. White, here, is not a colour in itself but an absence of colour, a reflection of the absence of the people. The place is boiling hot during the day, freezing at night, so it doesn't exactly encourage people to venture out, and indeed most of the townspeople seem content to settle into inertia. Only Merrill and her friend Ray make any attempt to explore, while her younger brother, Ned, shut in with their abusive and possibly mad father, also tries to escape, only to run into Steele who is, significantly, wearing black.

The narrative shifts between David, desperately trying to get back to Kraven Island though there is nothing to find there; Merrill, trying to make sense of her new surroundings; and Ned, desperate to return to the computer game he was snatched away from. All the main characters are, figuratively as well as literally, absent. David and Merrill have grown distant from each other, and he risks alienating his closest friends in his efforts to return to the island. Merrill fled her abusive father, and abandoned Ned to his fate despite promising to look after him. Ned is more alive in the computer game he plays than in real life. Even the mysterious Rawson Steele is distanced from both his past and his present.

The situation recalls, and the novel specifically references, famous cases like the *Mary Celeste* and Roanoke; at one point Steele and Merrill hide out in a cellar filled with historical clothing that seem to come from these and other disappearances. Setting the story in such a context tells us not to expect any explanation, indeed there's barely a resolution. It's not that kind of novel. When it ends there is still much to ponder; the story continues, much as life does, with puzzles unsolved and hints that may or may not be hopeful. All we know is that absence from Kraven Island gets right to the heart of the characters in this wonderfully atmospheric novel.



IMPULSE
Dave Bara
Del Rey pb, 384pp, £8.99

Jack Deighton

When the Carinthian crewed and commanded Lightship *Impulse* is attacked by a hyperdimensional displacement wave with the "flame of a thousand suns", newly graduated Quantar navy officer Peter Cochrane's commission on the *Starbound* is cancelled and he is reassigned to the *Impulse*. Carinthia and Quantar are former enemies now in alliance against the old Empire and, possibly, the mysterious Sri – whose biggest demerit is to have "no spiritual beliefs". Cochrane is the last scion of an aristocratic Quantar family, and has secret orders to protect the *Impulse* as a Quantar asset. The night before taking up his assignment Cochrane encounters Carinthian Commander Dobrina Kierkopf. We know where this is going when the two fence. Literally.

The tonal qualities of all this are decidedly retro. Most of it would not have been out of place in SF written sixty years ago. In harmony with those times the prose barely rises even to the workmanlike, the characters are mainly out of central casting and it feels as if no military story cliché is left unvisited. Contrastingly there is a nod to more modern norms with the presence of female navy officers – senior ones at that – but the story's sexual politics remain iffy. When one of Cochrane's fellow graduates "patted a serving girl gently on the bottom", she then "turned and smiled back at him". There is, too, a squeamishness round the subject of sexual encounters. Of a former relationship Cochrane tells us "things had taken their natural course to greater intimacy". The narration makes much of *Impulse*'s sumptuous interiors, wooden doors and library shelves stacked with leather-bound books, but then some of the books turn out to be virtual. While Cochrane is supposed to have been "the best" at the Academy, we are given little evidence of his ability; he seems more to muddle through.

Bara does try to differentiate his two allies linguistically: Quantars are roughly British, Carinthians presumably US. The word football is used in the British sense, there are references to bitter, arses and the interjection "Bollocks!" but also the transatlantically confused phrase "that goddamned Wesley's a pillock".

Bara's lightships' propulsive system is the hyperdimensional Hoagland drive. In one of the continuity errors littering the text Cochrane tells us on setting foot on *Impulse* that he always knows he's on a ship with a functioning Hoagland Field, but then later tells us when it gets switched on. Another occurs when Cochrane, having himself been left in command, seems to have forgotten the secret orders and leaves the *Impulse* in control of the ship's Earth Historian. (Don't ask.) Yet no blame attaches itself to him when the *Impulse* is duly hijacked – by the very man whom we were earlier shown Cochrane had to work hard to persuade to take over.

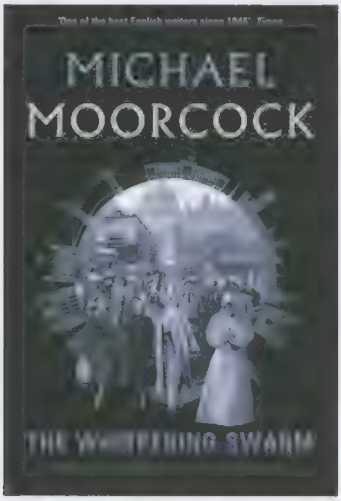
There is no real sense of a story arc. The pursuit of *Impulse* is diverted by a diplomatic interlude in the Levant system and the discovery of a Founder Relic. These are suddenly revealed to be objects of desire for which any other mission is to be sacrificed. Yet (spoiler) this one is let go to the enemy.

The info dumping is intrusive and ad hoc. Whenever a piece of equipment is required it is always handy and its utility immediately explained. It is difficult to resist the notion that Bara is making it all up as he goes along. He has also yet to learn the virtues of economy. Among others we have the extraneous "with that we were off" and "'Get me the vector marks to the target.' I did as instructed," plus the impossible "before I knew it I was at my room". Moreover, "One thing I was always told about open space EVA, don't look down". Down? In open space? And while I know what Bara means, does the construction "She shook her head negatively" actually make sense?

There is a liberal sprinkling of self-defeating techno-bollocks. An anti-graviton field "theoretically nullifies the effects of gravity within the field's range, separating matter at the sub-atomic level". How, pray, could the first part of this assertion possibly achieve the second? And high-amped laser energy can be produced and projected by mixing chemicals? Not a chance.

The sore thumb intrusion of a paragraph on the joy of reading highlights Bara's shortcomings. He's not done enough of it. His inspiration seems less to be written antecedents and more the likes of *Star Trek*. *Impulse* shares that programme's delusion that senior officers would routinely place themselves at risk by leaving their ships.

As thoughtless adventure stuff *Impulse* is fine. If that's all you want from your SF.



THE WHISPERING SWARM
Michael Moorcock
Gollancz, 480pp, £25 hb/£16.99 tpb (July)

Stephen Theaker

This is the story of Michael Moorcock, a hard-working writer of fantasy, science fiction and literary fiction plagued by the noise of a mysterious swarm. As a teenager, already at work in publishing, Moorcock meets Friar Isidore, who takes him to Alsacia, a magical Sanctuary with connections to all time and space by way of the moonbeam roads. There he meets people like Dick Turpin, Jim Bowie and Buffalo Bill.

At first he thinks them all actors on a film set, and later he comes to think the whole experience must have been a dream, but then comes the whispering, beginning shortly after the birth of his children, at which point it is but the "faintest of distant murmurings", growing into "a torrent of unfamiliar, whispering voices", and later becoming so unbearable that he can "barely ignore it for seconds at a time".

That noise abates only in Alsacia, so he decides to stay there. He eventually becomes friends with the four musketeers and Prince Rupert of the Rhine, and thence involved in the war between the Roundheads and the Cavaliers. Drawn into a desperate plot to save King Charles from Oliver Cromwell and the scaffold, Moorcock must balance principle, friendship and his own responsibilities, choosing to help his new comrades though they must surely fail.

His story is told in the first person, and the reader may find themselves wondering how much credit these adventures are owed. The whispering begins when he has been "worrying what was best for the baby, where we should move and so on", and much of his time in Alsacia is spent romantically with Moll Midnight, the inspiration for his most popular historical fantasies, while his wife and children believe him to be recuperating at a retreat.

Moorcock married young, to Helena, and they had children when young, and though his love for those children isn't in question it doesn't feel like he was ready to have them, and the character's justifications for his absences fall flat throughout. At times it feels like the whole thing is a tall tale told to his children to explain away the times when he abandoned them, a fanciful excuse for a mundane affair. He takes them to the cinema and the roof garden of Derry and Toms, but isn't always there for everyday life. He comes across pretty badly. He takes lots of drugs ("where the coke and the speed met the mary jane and the wine my poor, puny little ego decided that promises were negotiable"), decries "unhappy women who eroticised inequality", and at times becomes "briefly, a roaring monster with my friends or Helena".

It is easier to cheer on his successes in publishing, from *Tarzan Adventures* and *Sexton Blake Library* to *New Worlds*, Elric, Jerry Cornelius and American success, "going instantly from work-for-hire hack to literary novelist". He explains the two strands of his writing career thus: the fantasies are paperbacks and take three days to write, while the literary books appear in hardcover, are reviewed by the mainstream press, and take ten days to write.

His encounters with writers, editors and publishers make the book unmissable for publishing geeks and fans of the new wave, whatever its merits as a novel. He has a "desultory correspondence" with William Burroughs, trusts Barrington J. Bayley with the secret of Alsacia, and goes to the pub with Harry Harrison, Ted Carnell and John Wyndham. He helps "barmy, brilliant, treacherous old Phil" K. Dick get a publishing deal with Jonathan Cape. E.C. Tubb tries to get off with Moorcock's mum at a party. John Brunner gets it in the neck – "I tried to tell him he irritated people" – but gets credit for writing "with tremendous brio". Other names are somewhat familiar, like Jack Allard, Jack Slade and Rex Fisch, though it's worth remembering that the book tells us: "All of the characters…are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously."

The narrative is straightforward and linear, so it's not a difficult book, but it is peculiar. The autobiographical elements will fascinate fans, but if the book weren't stretched out to fit those facts it might have felt a bit tighter and less repetitive. Bored readers should skip to chapter forty-one before giving up.

That's when the book springs to life, with the mission to save King Charles. Moorcock, Rupert and the musketeers sneak into Whitehall with an unwitting impersonator, then try to escape down the frozen Thames at night while hunted by Cromwell's men. Like his fictional equivalent, our Moorcock has few equals when writing adventure tales, and the last forty thousand words here comprise one of his best.

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON

CHAPPIE

ROBOT OVERLORDS

HOME

CINDERELLA

THE TALE OF THE PRINCESS KAGUYA

SEVENTH SON

INSURGENT

HOT TUB TIME MACHINE 2

We had that Joss Whedon in our toilets during the shoot for **AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON**. (My office window is behind Thor's left shoulder in the campus scene.) Joss was mostly on the phone, no doubt because his consciousness couldn't be simultaneously transferred to second-unit drones of himself in Shepperton. Eventually we had to tell him to shut up because people were trying to work, dude. But no wonder he feels an affinity with Ultron, because here he is inhabiting the most powerful narrative machine in global history and little people just want to shoot arrows at him, or toss vibranium shields and uru hammers. Even Tony Stark is trying to put superhero cinema out of business by putting a mecha suit around humanity, when all he's trying to do is make the world better, like in *Serenity*, by creating monsters. The whole world should totally support his avenging.

One of the thrilling things about the age of *Ultron*, and the reasons why superhero cinema's decriers don't really deserve the oxygen of attention, is that even its makers are still learning how to harness its powers. *Ultron* is the genre's biggest adventure yet, and is made by people who have thought deeply about comics narrative in general and about the Marvel universe in particular across half a century. These are people who understand that the thing that happened at Marvel between 1961 and 1968 was genuinely one of the most significant events in the evolution of human narrative: that the age that created Ultron was a singularity in the history of storytelling that gave birth to a new species of narrative intelligence. Studios merely like superhero films because they do a lot of things that play well in the present state of the industry: they use digital filmmaking in the service of potent, limbic four-quadrant narrative, and play very strongly to global audiences, extended franchising, and the premium exhibition technologies of 3D and IMAX. But those who know the genre from the inside understand that the gift of superhero narrative is to distil the most potent narrative concepts of science fiction to their most visceral, concentrated, accelerated, and insane shorthand form; to burn through story and tropes at a monthly pace across legions of titles; and to magnify adolescent desires about violence, sexuality, identity, and self-esteem to epic, cosmos-endangering scale in casually visionary images that chew up worlds for breakfast.

The first half of *Age of Ultron* proceeds comfortably, with a well conceived and integrated villain rise, action and downtime sequences showcasing the team in action and at play, fan service and cameos aplenty, and a strong double climax in the African sequences. But at roughly the moment when Nick Fury emerges from the second-act shadows, the film takes a strange and bold turn into purer Marvel plotting, as the Phase Three arc about the Infinity Stones wraps itself around Ultron's never quite intelligible project to become a real boy, which the Avengers hijack to build their own anti-Ultronic android AI superbeing in a *Transformers*-style hour-long action climax that unleashes the post-narrative grammar of action cinema on an almost abstract plot set inside an extinction-level bomb in the form of a levitated Sokovia flooded with robot clone-drones. How we got from there to this is one of the film's most audacious finesses. "Started out Jarvis was just a natural language AI," says Tony in a line which distils a lot of what comics narrative can do with sf and vice-versa: "now he runs on

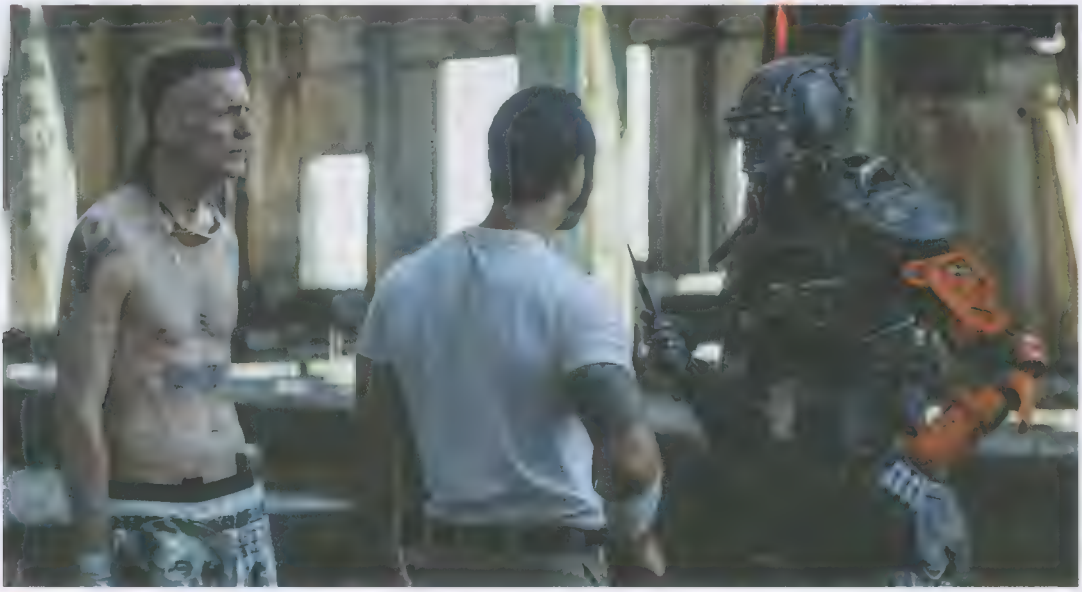
top of Iron Legion," much as *Age of Ultron* is a deeply mythologised, often quite strange AI plot run on top of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

It's a film that feels its responsibility keenly. The last things Whedon had left to prove were that he was worth paying top dollar for, as opposed to the pittance he got for *Avengers*, and that he could build a superproject from the ground up. He's certainly given it all he's got. In a bravura acceleration of *Serenity*'s introductory one-shot tour of the ship and cast, we here see all six leads in action in the first ninety seconds, and the incoming Maximoffs tossed exhilaratingly into the same sequence minutes later. The Whedon fairy dust is sprinkled liberally over the huge ensemble, albeit with forgivably mixed results. Of the new characters, Wanda is admirable, Pietro effective enough for his more limited brief, and Vision even stranger than is called for. Of the old, Hawkeye has been laboriously made over to serve as the heart of the team to Cap's soul and Tony's head; the new Banner–Romanoff chemistry is painfully inert, despite one player who delivered all three of last year's best sf performances and one who capped that by achieving screen rapport with Keira Knightley; while the big three are generously serviced with zingers, but are here coming off their best solo instalments and feel squashed to the sides by comparison. But it's a film that understands why Scarlet Witch is a potent addition to the roster, despite a power that consists principally of bending fingers at unusual angles. (Watch the B-roll footage of Elizabeth Olsen shooting her scenes before the graphics were added, and marvel mightily at her faith in the director and fx team not to make this a career-ending performance.) Her gift of getting inside your head mean that she can twist character, excavate deep motivation and deepest fears, and throw the leads into fugue states of flashback, plot vision, and hallucination.

Like *Iron Man 3* and *The Winter Soldier*, *Age of Ultron* is interested in using its new global cinematic language to talk about geopolitics. Setting a big sequence in Seoul has done wonders for the opening weekend there, but it's also been a significant opening-out of the

Like Iron Man 3 and The Winter Soldier, Age of Ultron is interested in using its new global cinematic language to talk about geopolitics

MCU to embrace its mission as a brand for all mankind. The theatrical cut, at least, is vague on the specifics of Sokovian history ("Sokovia's had a rough history") and just who was firing the Stark missiles at it in the first place; but the whole point is that, as Cap briefs, "it's nowhere special, but it's on the way to everywhere". And if there's a lingering sense of deflated expectations about the whole thing; if it's possible to feel if the AI plot in particular suffers a bit from Whedon's comparative indifference to science-fictional logic that stalks *Firefly* and *Dollhouse*, and if we've seen a few too many of these third-act big things slowly falling to earth, this is nevertheless the biggest big thing yet, and with a leaf-on-the-wind moment you didn't see coming to avenge. It's a strange mixture, but nobody knows how to mix an ensemble of incompatible flavours like



Chappie himself is an enormously potent creation, a superintelligent but utterly guileless child alternately cherished and corrupted

Whedon. "Hopefully this puts an end to the Chitauri and Hydra," says Cap to Thor after the opening sequence has wrapped up loose ends from earlier films: "so, yes. Revels." Inevitably one or two of them are going to be coconut.

The Jarvis–Ultron smackdown between heroics and villainy is played out in a single robot soul in **CHAPPIE**, Neill Blomkamp's ambitious AI parable taking us back to Joburg for a mashup of *AI* and *RoboCop*, as Dev Patel cracks the hard problem of machine consciousness and smuggles a soul into a police-drone body, only for his newborn to fall into the hands of drug gangsters Ninja and Yo-Landi out of Die Antwoord and suffer a brutalising tough-love induction into what being a real boy means in the Soweto underworld, while on the outside Hugh Jackman and Sigourney Weaver are replaying the OmniCorp boardroom plot and pretty much everyone but Dev wants Chappie dead. The film is trying to do a lot of things at once, but the one it does best is a bleakly comic allegory of abusive parenting and the damage done to malleable innocents by an adult world which lies to them about good and evil, life and death. Chappie himself is an enormously potent creation, a superintelligent but utterly guileless child alternately cherished and corrupted by the madness around him, and horrified to discover that his appointed span of days makes Roy Batty seem like Steve Rogers; while on a technical level it's a stunning marriage of Blomkamp's signature digital puppetry, including elements like the expressive bunny-ear antennae going back to his maker's early roboshorts *Tetra Vaal* and *Tempbot*, with inspired voice performance and mocapped pantomime by Sharlto Copley. Even the hip-hop duo turn their stage personas into performances out of vintage Ozploitation, but the edge of amateurism serves the tone at least as well as Jackman's pumped-up Ocker villain (one of a number of sly inversions of *Real Steel*). Where the film starts to lose cohesion is when it modulates from *AI* into *Transcendence* with a surprise plot about cybereschatology and human_consciousness.dat uploads, leading to a narratively rewarding but conceptually preposterous finale, partly retracing the ending of *District 9*, which sacrifices the film's hard-edged urban futurism for a retreat into a more openly fantastic meld of human and machine. But like *Ultron*, it's a densely intertextual film, and has thought about robot cinema as deeply as Whedon has about superteam heroics; and Blomkamp's urban vision remains one of the most distinctive brands in cinema. As the film tells Chappie, "it's going to be the future soon".

The Jonathan Coulton robot-wars songbag finds itself raided again to title Jon Wright's **ROBOT OVERLORDS** (originally, and much better, *Our Robot Overlords*): a British kids' film at the farthest end of the budgetary galaxy from all of the above, in which Earth, but more particularly Douglas, Belfast, and Carrickfergus collectively impersonating the Sussex coast,

has been occupied by an invasion force of giant robots from outer space, and the fight against machine apocalypse is stepped up to by a ragged band of meddling-kid irregulars. Wright's previous film *Grabbers* viewed an alien invasion through the shutters of an Irish boozer lock-in, but he's upped his game here with some power casting and a cheeky ambition to show what kind of welcome the Decepticons would be receive if they tried to mess with three generations of *2000AD* readers. A film which offers the rare spectacle of Sir Ben Kingsley (with Huddersfield accent) torturing Roy Hudd OBE, it's unashamed to court comparison with *Doctor Who* and the Children's Film Foundation, but also has the audacity to marry the eighties Amblin trope-book of kids' adventure cinema with the spirit of John Wyndham and a resonantly European occupation narrative. The machine invaders pose as benign cosmic agents of inquiry ("Our intention is to study all sentient thought in the universe"), but slimy collaborators like Sir Ben know that their true motives are more Ultronistic, and that after they've harvested the last of our brains they'll leave our world "unsullied by overpopulation and pollution". Luckily Gillian Anderson is on hand as a middle-class supermum ("You were a great teacher; I'm sure you're a good mother"), at one delightful moment using her classroom-management skills to boss her way out of custody. A film that seems entirely made of tax credit, it clobbers you with the opening decalogue "Isle of Man Film, Pinewood Pictures, Umbra Telegraph, and BFI present a Tempo Productions/Wasted Talent film in association with British Film Company, Embankment Films, Nvizible and Northern Ireland Screen", and a reel of eight closing idents at the end. But it's done with enormous enthusiasm and everybody involved is clearly up for everything, till by the end you can believe that if that Ultron showed his face round these parts we'd show him what a good avenging looks like.

A soft-play animated version of the occupation scenario unspools in Dreamworks' **HOME**, as displaced galactic asylum seekers the Boov import their problems to Earth, first by hoovering humanity out of their homes and cars in an alien rapture for internment in Australia, and then by dissident nitwit Oh's accidental invitation of their nemeses the Gorg to crash the flatwarming party thanks to "the latest in a series of terrible though unintentionally humorous mistakes". Fortunately Oh falls in with resilient Bajan immigrant urchin Tip, and the two of them embark on a 3D aerial road trip in search of her mom, his destiny, humanity's salvation, and redemption, peace, and understanding all round. Adam Rex's source novel *The True Meaning of Smekday* is largely abandoned once the characters and initial setup have been established, its darker comic play with galactic atrocity, casual disintegrations, and pointed Native American glosses replaced along with the thinly-disguised Disney-

Dreamworks needed Home to do well – and the Almost Home prequel short prepended to How to Train your Dragon 2 was ominously unamusing

Cinderella has a lot to say on the subject of princesshood, that being the commodity it's primarily peddling to its consumers

land action in favour of a reassuring revelation that all scary bad things are just misunderstood cute good things in Nemesis the Warlock costumes. Dreamworks badly needed *Home* to do well, and the *Almost Home* prequel short prepended to *How to Train your Dragon 2* was ominously unamusing; but the feature has turned out bright, funny, and heartful, with a timely message about refugee politics, heritage theft, and the power of xenophilic understanding to heal the wounds of history.

The favourite story of Asimov's Robbie, the 1940 AI forefather of today's summer-long cinema supertoys, was cleverly not *Pinocchio* (much too on-the-nose) but **CINDERELLA**, now lavishly reincarnate on the screen in Chris Weitz and Ken Branagh's live-action Disney reboot. After mildly revisionist takes on earlier heroines in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Maleficent*, the Weitz–Branagh version has upped the stakes by seeking a way to play the Disney princess straight in these fourth-wave deconstructive times and turn the animated Ella into a real girl with a wave of their blue fairy godmother wand. This takes the film into considerably more interesting territory than the 1950 version – which was quite an odd film, with Perrault's narrative going on largely in the background of what was essentially an extended Tom & Jerry caper like an cartoon musical Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, leaving plenty of spaces in the story for Branagh's version to fill out even before the half-hour additional running time. There's room now for a lengthy prologue showing Ella's mum Bambied out of the picture, her dad's remarriage and death, the transformation of Ella's life and how she copes by promoting aggressive wetness as a philosophy for life ("Have courage and be kind" is her mother's mantra and hers) while she hangs out in the attic and holds one-sided converse with the vermin. But her prince is also subject to parental tension and bereavement, though it all comes good in the end: "I love you, son." "I love you, father." [Dad dies; flunkies hasten to locate the royal sick bucket.]

Cinderella has a lot to say on the subject of princesshood, that being the commodity it's primarily peddling to its consumers, and the qualities of heart that earn you the social mobility denied to your more openly aspirational siblings, as Ella's renunciation of self, dreams, and worldly matters deliver her all these things and more, including the revenge she can then passive-aggressively decline in an ostentatiously sincere assertion of forgiveness. For adult viewers, it's pretty toxic stuff, particularly in its depiction of parental remarriage and step-relationships, its body fetishism (the stepsisters have to be tugged into corsets to match Ella's natural waist), and its parade of hot aristocratic chicks as a meat market for the prince to take his pick. But it's written for the very young, with godmum voiceover patiently spelling out the plot points and subtext the narratively inexperienced may have missed ("Would who she was, who she really was, be enough? This was the great-

est risk to take, to be seen as we truly are"), and takes seriously its responsibility as potentially its viewers' first film ever, just as Chappie learns his moral compass from He-Man. But no modern Cinderella can quite escape the shadow of Carrie White, particularly when this Ella runs up her own frock before the confrontation over it with her guardian; and indeed there are moments when the ball parades its innocence in our faces and dares us to find the darkness. "I've never shown this place to anyone," says Richard Madden's prince, taking Ella aside. "A secret garden!" she exclaims: "I love it!", her innocent joy a stern rebuke to those who find themselves imagining the ropes and cuffs being produced at this point.

Isao Takahata's **THE TALE OF THE PRINCESS KAGUYA** offers its own deconstruction of animated princesshood in a hauntingly lovely and poignant telling of Japan's oldest narrative treasure, the thirteenth-century 'Tale of the Bamboo Cutter' about a moon maiden who falls to earth, rises from peasantry to palace, is wooed by princes and the emperor, but finally has to leave our world and her heartfelt memories of its intense but fragile joy. It's hard not to read Takahata's swansong as a valedictory parable of Studio Ghibli's own rise and passing, as the greatest fantasy film factory in world cinema fades from our world like a wish your heart makes; and ironically for the studio which has for so long been positioned as the anti-Disney, this is the nearest thing they've ever done to a Disney narrative, offering us a Ghibli princess who talks to frogs, spunkily defies feudal restraints on girls' self-determination, and proudly renounces the trappings of aristocracy: "I was born to live here with the birds, bugs and beasts." The longstanding Marxist conscience of Ghibli, Takahata returns to his signature themes from *Pom Poko* and *Only Yesterday* about the dignity of the peasant class and the rural landscape's moral fightback against the anomie and corruption of the city. Like the natural history of tanuki and the economics of organic farming in those two films respectively, in this one you learn an awful lot about bamboo, while *Repo Man* fans will be delighted to encounter a film featuring an actual real-to-gosh melon farmer.

For Kaguya, the animators' brief has been to reproduce the actual lines of Takahata's long-serving storyboard artist Osamu Tanabe

But it's also a deeply felt film about animation itself. One of the reasons for Takahata's growing disenchantment with traditional cel animation has been the way it sanitises the vibrancy and dynamism out of pencil art, even in his own studiomate Hayao Miyazaki's own designs and storyboards. So for *Kaguya*, the animators' brief has been to reproduce the actual lines of Takahata's long-serving storyboard artist Osamu Tanabe, driving animators nuts and the production to surf release dates as the director tinkered and tweaked; while legendary Ghibli background artist Kazuo Oga has been put to work in watercolour, which looks gorgeous but is a nightmare medium to animate. But the results pay off in some absolutely stunning images and semi-abstract sequences that look like nothing ever seen in the medium;

Troubled yadap Seventh Son offers its occidental version of the fantasy middle ages in a heavily reinvented retelling of The Spook's Apprentice

and the effect is only enhanced by the strange narrative detours into alternate realities and dreams, culminating in a richly elegiac ending as Buddha floats in from the moon with his stormtrooper house band to lift the memory of this impure earth from the princess's mind forever.

Troubled yadap **SEVENTH SON** offers its occidental version of the fantasy middle ages in a heavily reinvented retelling of *The Spook's Apprentice*, the first of Joseph Delaney's likable *Wardstone Chronicles* series about a junior assistant ghostbuster in a lightly alternate mediaeval Lancashire. The book's twelve-year-old Tom and his conflicted witch-peer Alice, along with Tom's ill-fated predecessor Billy Bradley, have been dishily aged up to be played respectively by Ben Barnes, Alicia Vikander, and Kit Harrington, all now with very unLancastrian stateside accents, though Jeff Bridges as the witchbuster general and mentor has chosen a diction all his own. Like *Home*, it keeps the characters and premise but mostly discards the novel's storyline in favour of a loose chain of action beats; and the books' strong sense of folk landscape and relish for elaborately ghoulish lore-work have been replaced by a disappointingly generic, if often spectacular, fantasyland. It's become fairly rare to see a film which lies quite so dead on the screen as some of the early sequences in this one, though it's just about worth sticking with for the startling witchy bustier Vikander's character dons to show her drift to the dark side.

Divergent midquel **INSURGENT** fares marginally better, though the most enjoyable thing about it remains Lionsgate's decision to call the films *The Divergent Series*, which would be brilliant if only one could believe the joke intentional. But it does at least aptly describe the films' relationship to the books, as the success of Neil Burger's first instalment has forced some hard decisions about how to salvage three films from two books which pretty much fall off a cliff after the first volume. Veronica Roth's trilogy wears out its welcome rapidly after the strong series opener, its resonant scenario about teens sorting-hatted for life into predetermined personality types giving way to protracted interfactional intrigue that runs quickly out of uses for its premise; and the film version has followed the *Hunger Games* path of putting bigger-name writers on the sequel, with stints from Akiva Goldsman and the *Apes* films' Mark Bomback, and between them they've found some ingenious ways to hit the novel's main plot beats while redrawing the lines that join those dots. The dangerous, if anticlimactic, secret harboured by the first film's victims and sought now by big-bad Kate Winslet finds itself cinematised as a McGuffin box that can only be opened by an extended series of themed set pieces to test all five sides of the heroine's threateningly resilient personality; her inner life is probed by a battery of new character tests involving unreal versions of characters in simulations,

dreams, and flashbacks; and even the major player killed at the end gets offed by a different character for a different reason. For the first half hour it seems as if it's going to be an absolute stiff, and the narrative remains unavoidably teen-dystopia generic; but it does come to life as the action returns to the streets of the series' evocative if nonsensical post-apocalyptic Chicago, with the never-disappointing Shailene Woodley now in her *Fault in our Stars* bob for the fans. Weirdly, this is one of the things that remains from the book.

One sequel that seems unlikely to make it a threesome is **HOT TUB TIME MACHINE 2**, which sees the return of John Cusack's buddies from 2010, sans Cusack, in a second wave of adult-rated infantility about the midlife male condition. Ironically, it was Cusack who originally brought in director Steve Pink, and new writers came in to clip the claws of Josh Heald's coarser but funnier original script, replacing the cocaine-driven hilarity with a familially-driven plot somewhat at odds with the initial concept. But Pink has brought Heald back for the sequel, which sees the supporting characters slipping back into the grip of their demons even in the dream midlives they built for themselves in the first film, and thrown now into the future to witness the trajectory of the world they wished into being. Cusack's character is "off on an experiential journey, but I've got a feeling we're going to be seeing him again" – a reference to a baffling cameo at the climax that in the event was sensibly dropped, while Lizzie Caplan's character has been casually killed off, leaving the ensemble dynamics thrashing around headlessly under the motor control of their comedy male foils. But the film embraces this as it must, and remains true to its predecessor's frankness about the destruction done to self and loved ones by the values it feeds and celebrates: "How can we expect to find happiness in time if we're just not happy people?"

The mood in Hollywood is that comedy is in crisis, and certainly the miserable death this film died at the box office makes it all too apparent how long five years is in the shifting jetstream of taste. But if you can see past the relentless laddishness, the overplayed gay-panic jokes, and the fact that none of the women seems to age over forty years, Heald has a feel for laughs and has laid down a solid rhythm track of comic beats over which the cast improvise well – particularly in the film's showcase sequence where two of the characters are forced to have live virtual sex on national television ("It's like *Lawnmower Man*, except that we're supposed to fuck"). "There is a force pulling the strings," they philosophise at their lowest point, "setting everything up just so they can be perfectly knocked down." But redemption is just around a corner in time, and a final credits montage effectively runs through the never-to-be-made third film in fast-forward, showing the quartet using the tub to Zelig back through American history stealing lives and making whoopee across the multiverse. No strings on these guys.

For the first half hour Insurgent seems as if it's going to be an absolute stiff, and the narrative remains unavoidably teen-dystopia generic

LASER FODDER

TONY LEE

THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY PART 1

PADDINGTON

ROLLERBALL

INTERSTELLAR

FREQUENCIES

MANKIND'S LAST STAND

FELLINI SATYRICON

HARLOCK SPACE PIRATE

THE HOUSE AT THE END OF TIME

NORTHMEN

MOONDIAL

THE LAST SURVIVORS

THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES

EXODUS

RZ-9

After the first couple of sadly unimpressive outings in this action adventure franchise, Jennifer 'J-Law' Lawrence seems to have found her feet as leading actress in time for **THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY PART 1** (Blu-ray/DVD, 16 March), as heroine Katniss becomes the public face of a revolution. But can she unite regional districts against oppressive rule by the Capitol elite? Will she play the role of symbolic 'Mockingjay', or is the 'girl on fire' burnt out? She might, at least, be the "best dressed rebel in history". In between the durm and strang episodes of propaganda videos and guerrilla tactics versus mass-media brainwashing and off-screen air raids, archer Kat proves that with some new hi-tech exploding arrows she can shoot down the enemy's bombers (although no explanation is given here as to why the warplanes are flying so low) while she's actively supporting a progressively martial campaign by District 13's power-hungry President Coin (Julianne Moore on strong form) for a regime change.

Our troubled young heroine continues to define herself by love for prospective boyfriends (captive Peeta, heroic Gale), and it is a weakness that cartoonish nemesis/opponent President Snow (Donald Sutherland) exploits with crushingly mechanical effectiveness. Francis Lawrence (*Constantine*, *I Am Legend*) directs with all his usual flair for melodramatic excess. Best supporting character award goes to the late Philip Seymour Hoffman, who, if nothing else, invites tolerant viewers to believe that a man could be stung with a name like 'heaven's bee', and not simply implode noisily from a grievous case of aggravated embarrassment.

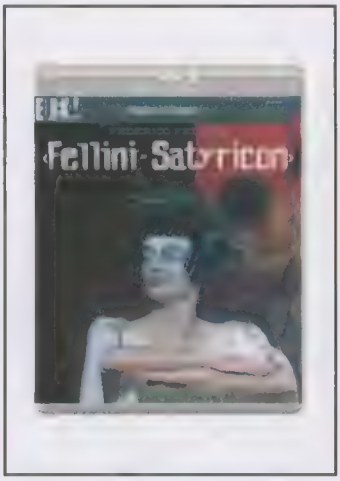
While this leisurely paced sequel demonstrates a slight improvement in overall quality as futuristic drama and teen rom-dram, perhaps it's fair to say that it's actually not exactly the 'best' picture of this overly po-faced coming-of-age series so far, just the least ridiculous and pretentiously sentimental. Hopefully this year's finale will put a victorious end to beleaguered Kat's overworked angst.

A splendid live-action remake of an animated TV series, Paul King's **PADDINGTON** (DVD/Blu-ray, 23 March) begins rather poorly, with a clumsily sketched origin story for its titular hero in "darkest Peru". Once the Disneyfied introductions are out of the way, an orphaned bear with "a worrying marmalade habit" stows away aboard a cargo ship to London where he's promptly adopted by the awfully nice Brown family (led by Hugh Bonneville and Sally Hawkins), whose minor domestic/middle-class problems are eventually solved when they set aside their generational differences and take bold action to rescue their foreign house-guest from endangered captivity. As a lifelike yet anthropomorphised waddler, in an old red hat and a kid's duffle-coat, our unerringly polite, furry hero annoys nosy neighbour Mr Curry (Peter Capaldi, *Doctor Who*), and is stalked by predatory cartoon taxidermist (ageless Nicole Kidman), callously intent upon adding Paddington to her rare animal exhibits in the Natural History Museum.

Feeling not quite at home, even when provided with all the bear necessities of family life, Paddy goes on a door-to-door quest for long-lost explorer Captain Clyde, but finds only peril for his trouble. Although some of the predictable action is unavoidably inert in terms of entertainment value, there are several witty one-liners to raise chuckles or laughs – unless your sense of humour is completely turned off at the mains. Receiving a missing-person report at the local police station, the nonchalant desk sergeant sighs at a perfectly accurate description of the bear and deadpans: "It's not much to go on."

Looking after author Michael Bond's living legacy (of beloved children's books) very well indeed, this addition to the classic franchise is a slickly directed satire which reconsiders immigrant experience (without being sent to Coventry), embedded with a series of slapstick bear-centric misadventures, in a family feel-good hit blessed with a wonderful cast (supporting players like Jim Broadbent and Imelda Staunton are great and even Julie Walters is tolerable). A charming urban fairy tale, in a BritisHollywood neverland promoting a multicultural street-wisdom (represented by theatrical asides from a calypso band), *Paddington* is produced without any of the crude attitudes and pointlessly raucous sketches of *Ted*. Its gentle comedy and absurdist tributes to genre movies such as *Brazil* and *Mission: Impossible* enhance its metropolitan references.

Mum and Dad get over their low-key marital strife, Meccano-kid Jonathan finds a use for an old chemistry set (I had one exactly the same), and obstreperous teenager Judy overcomes her case of acute embarrassment with parental affection or authority. And yet, because it seems the ever-courteous bear's work – as the strange glue that repairs a fractious household – is never done, a sequel appears likely.

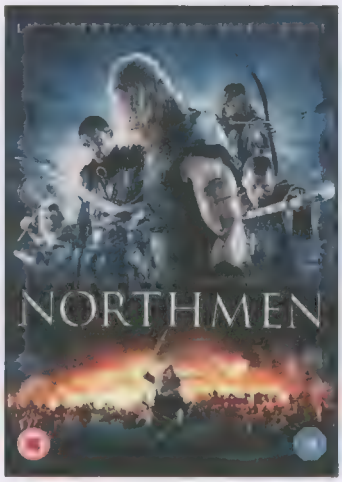


Made in 1975, **ROLLERBALL** (Blu-ray, 23 March) is arguably the most famous of all the death-game movies. James Caan plays the people's hero Jonathan E, only veteran of an international sport, ruthlessly manipulated by corporate exploiter Bartholomew (the great John Houseman) to further stultify the apathetic public into abject docility.

Inspired by the fad for roller derby, most notably dramatised by *Kansas City Bomber* (1972) starring Raquel Welch, the killer-sport of roller-ball involves teams of skaters/bikers playing for their lives, with a cannonball to be caught and thrown into a hole to score points. As the rules of the match are slowly deleted for increasingly bloodthirsty thrills on the lethal track, Jonathan eventually recognises that his celebrity status has become a considerable threat to executive overlords controlling industrialised society in place of governments around the world. Sounds a bit familiar, eh? Any similarity to our cultural dystopia and endemic political corruption of today is entirely prescient.

Norman Jewison's directorial style is rather patchy, with the gladiatorial fame and ultra-decadent lifestyle that emergent-paranoiac Jonathan enjoys better defined than the merely cartoon business of a corporate elite seemingly impervious to human ambition. Even their greed is stagnant! Nonetheless, *Rollerball* remains quite overtly serious as dystopian SF, especially when compared to its main rival of the 1970s, Paul Bartel's black comedy *Death Race 2000*. Ralph Richardson's extended cameo as the apparently captive 'librarian', a scatterbrained gatekeeper of all knowledge stored in a faulty protein-computer system (named Zero), is the delightfully amusing highlight of this movie's comic-relief content. The big finale's exploits are rebel rousing, of course. But it is a cold fury of desperation that emerges from a cocoon of nihilism. The hi-def transfer looks and sounds superb.

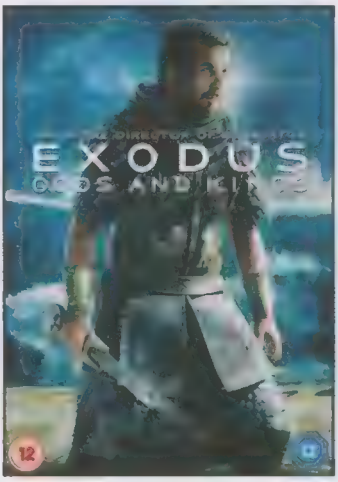
John McTiernan's post-millennial remake was all the better as sci-fi action for its lack of a socio-political naivety and critically perceived double-standards (wanting to condemn violent sports but still wallow in macho antics/unsubtle clichés of heroic bloodshed) that undermined the purported classic status of Jewison's SF movie. And then Drew Barrymore's entertaining *Whip It* (2009) proved to be a wry variant of the all-female grassroots-sports movie, much closer, despite its teen heroine (Ellen Page), to *Kansas City Bomber* than Mark L. Lester's guilty-pleasure musical romance *Roller Boogie* (1979), a VHS-rentable disco vehicle for Linda Blair. Since roller derby is now reportedly under consideration for the 2020 Olympics, we might wonder if *Rollerball* will soon turn out to be a more truly prophetic piece of cinema than it seemed when it first appeared.



In the large hard SF collider of genre cinema, where concepts are reduced to photons ready for smashing together on screen (scattering narrative decay of standard models but rewarding attentive viewers with fresh perspectives usually unavailable outside of constant readers' heads), we find Christopher Nolan's **INTERSTELLAR** (DVD/Blu-ray, 30 March) combines intellectual mystery and inspired realism from a generation of science fiction movies. Everything from *Mad Max*, *Silent Running*, Disney's *Black Hole* and Zemeckis' *Contact* to, most prominently, *2001: A Space Odyssey* is earnestly sampled. The result is just as much of a geeky knowledge test with a lot of credibility-straining content for mainstream audience tolerance, as it is a blockbuster of adventures in space-time that eagerly anticipates applause from the corner of sci-fi fandom that over-praised *Inception*. In many ways, *Interstellar*'s closest neighbour in the genre system is Peter Hyams' *2010* (1984). Like that slick sequel it has impending disaster on Earth, off-screen but influential aliens helping mankind to conquer space, and a thrilling climax where human ingenuity confronts extraterrestrial technology.

It's a tale of dauntless explorers betrayed by Brian Aldiss style hubris, and first contact reloaded that unfortunately owes rather more to Spielberg than Kubrick. Yes, sentimentality cancels out rationality every time in this tricksy story of a time-dilation afterlife escape from beyond the event horizon. The keenly dramatic impact of jarring viewpoints, concerning gravity-enabled interpersonal communication via tesseractive ansible-analogue, is nullified by stifling dialogue. *Interstellar* is cosmic but too corny. It's enlightening but arrives without any lightning strikes of understanding. Matthew McConaughey is the adaptable vehicle for this journey from an apocalyptic dust-bowl in the American heartland, to a heart's desire fulfilment by magical wormhole effects. Its poetic words are largely clichéd (as *Babylon 5*'s ambassador G'Kar once explained, "The universe is run by the complex interweaving of three elements…energy, matter, and enlightened self-interest"), even if the movie's visual gimmicks are expansive.

The trouble with McConaughey is that his chameleon act (see mojo differences between *Reign of Fire* and *Contact* or *Sahara* and TV's *True Detective*) tends to work against him – as rugged individualist, maverick intellectual, or matinee hero. It is nigh impossible for even a gifted actor to play such varied archetypes very well. Yes, he can portray both over-emotional high achievers



and charismatic lowlifes (go watch *Killer Joe*, where McConaughey is disagreeably nasty as a very different Cooper), but, in any consideration of his career's trajectory, and his navigation through the archaic system of Hollywood pigeonholing, it is clear that his acting ability is often limited to familiar formulaic thespian responses. Whether he is essaying a sailor or an engineer, he never appears very nautical or tech-savvy and typically seems as if he doesn't know a wheelhouse from a windmill.

So, while the enterprise of *Interstellar* demands careful thought and provokes commentary, it remains an endeavour locked into back-bedroom projections of genre imagination. It takes a lifetime or two for the saga to complete its story arc and yet its epic sweep actually develops into nothing more than a full circle. Despite the complex timeline of a climactic sequence that involves an equation that solves the intergalactic travel mystery (the Earth-side heroine's discovery should have been a *voilà* moment, not a Eureka! shout), 'stay' is the message that is transmitted here, suggesting failure and cultural stagnation, but *Interstellar* is a movie that should have said go! Go! GO!

"No talking!" Darren Paul Fisher's **FREQUENCIES** (DVD, 20 April) is a fascinating, low-budget philosophical SF drama with a pack of ironic, phildickian alternate-reality twists. High functioning student Marie (Eleanor Wyld) happily fails to have genuinely emotional responses beyond her pretence of a polite concern for others' feelings. Low achiever Zak (Daniel Fraser) is not really halfway smart enough for her but even their poor match resonates, as his best friend Theo's calculations and experiments discover a means to adjust her destiny.

Brilliantly devised but utterly bonkers, this arty British genre rom-com (not for inducing laughter, but wry amusement) is about fate and luck presented here as quite scientifically quantifiable traits with such predictable results as mind-control. Is there any such thing as free will? Does love actually exist? Can music have 'magical' effects? Secret words are part of quantum entanglement and so they can control behaviour or, at least, foster centuries of government conspiracies for our young heroes to uncover.

The suspenseful intrigues deliver mystery content with a winning repertoire of indie production quirks but, on the whole, this isn't as politically confrontational, and never as violently comicbook, as the far more inherently troubling

Tony reviews a lot more DVDs and Blu-rays in our sister magazine *Black Static*, often with easy to enter competitions to win some of those titles

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sociopathic themes of TV series *Utopia*. However, very much in its favour, there are practically no special effects (few are required anyway), and it's wonderful to see such a mightily ambitious work of imagination – acclaimed at festivals, where the flick was originally titled *OXV: The Manual* (a naff oddity that might have put some people off!) – getting a release by Signature. Whereas Shane Carruth's two offerings so far have a tendency for baffling pretension, even the head-spinning explanations and somewhat force-fed exposition of Fisher's picture (his genre debut!) are gifted with a startlingly clarity.

Do not mistake the comparative lightness of Fisher's approach and his movie's witty tone for brightly optimistic SF though. This occasionally chilling story presents us with a broken society of gross injustice and stark inequality that is nearly the equal of dystopian classics by Orwell or Huxley. There is more than a touch of *Rashomon* in timeline flashbacks to diverse viewpoints from characters at different ages and yet the narrative is entirely lucid throughout because we understand its focus on perceptions.

Painfully derivative cross-genre picture *Outpost 37*, retitled as **MANKIND'S LAST STAND** (DVD, 20 April), is a clueless post-invasion/alien-war story that never rises above its generic horizon, let alone a depleted ozone layer. Promoted as if it's another major action epic like *Battle: Los Angeles* – even though it only wants to be *Monsters* meets *District 9* – this lacks the low-budget charms of Danny Bilson's *Zone Troopers*. Special-effects techie turned novice director Jabbar Raisani throws together routinely chaotic jitter-cam scenes with interviews of sentimentality, not character history, that cripple his unwise choice of a pseudodocumentary format. With its embedded-reporters clichés and various blank-firing ciphers as frontline troops this fields self-referential clutter (including what seems to be CGI-doctored TV news clips as exposition), and it fails to clear the desert encampment sandbags for any clean shots at sci-fi originality.

"I like to hear Greek while I'm eating."

Made in 1969, **FELLINI SATYRICON** (Blu-ray, 27 April) is a broken narrative of shameless theatricality and mythical burlesque. It's a showcase of colourful and operatic episodes of surrealism depicting the ancient decadence of Rome's fall, but its debauchery and bawdy farce – with some grumpy old men surrounded by fat slags, pretty fags and panto hags – often seems like high-camp smut nowadays. Gay erotica is torpid action with creative lethargy, in sharp contrast to the often starkly weird scenery.

And yet, poetic images of social grotesques or moral decay punctuate inherent pessimism about human culture and the frailty of civilisation. Boldly fantastic scenes might labour under their weight of betrayals, but some of the satirical storytelling is quite impossible to take seriously if, like me, you saw Monty Python's later *Life of Brian* before this.

After he survives a comedy-festival labyrinth – from which emerges Luigi Montefiori, unmasked as the gladiator/Minotaur – young hero Encolpio (Martin Potter, perhaps the only British actor to play Robin Hood and Tarzan) endures shame from his impotence in a porn show. His quest for a cure leads to further humiliation.

Model turned actress Capucine (first of all the mononymous media celebrities) portrays the most understanding and tolerant wife imaginable, up until her unfaithful husband is executed. Fellini's movie began with a wall of graffiti and it ends suddenly, with character frescos on crumbling ruins, viewable now as a fitting comment upon his great influence on cinema as 20th century art form and the state of today's industry.

Based on a frequently remade 1970s TV cartoon show, **HARLOCK SPACE PIRATE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 27 April) is a spin-off Manga movie of photo-real animation, directed by Shinji Aramaki (maker of a franchised movie *Starship Troopers: Invasion*). From an unlikely futurama, young cowboy Logan is a new recruit aboard immortal Captain Harlock's battleship *Arcadia*, but Logan is actually a secret agent with a cyber-eye for spying on the space pirates. He's working for the Gaia coalition that protect the Earth from the 500 billion colonial repatriates who are all suddenly eager to return from far galaxies to their ancestors' home world.

With a disabled chief baddie in his stealthy hover-chair, a quasi-religious order sanctioning a holographic cover-up of the heavily volcanised Earth, and a mysterious elfin alien, this Japanese space opera is a cheesy mishmash of environmentalism and old-fashioned pulp elements. There's the omnipresent skull 'n' crossbones to contend with – as it denotes everything that is campy and caricatured, yet uncannily appealing, about aloof antihero Harlock and his dark-matter powered *Arcadia*, a kind of ramrod vessel whose gloomy ambiance is only brightened by the otherwise anonymous crew's blonde lieutenant, slinking around in her combat corsets.

There's atonement on one side and vengeance on the other, but it's melodrama that rules either way, and the SF rarely makes any sense in terms of future-history or rationalist extrapolation. Can or should Logan attempt to avert a crisis by resorting to a resetting of the mythical world-saving 'genesis clock'? "We'll never see tomorrow if we're blinded by lies today!" This is occasionally good fun but never as entertaining as the director's recent *Appleseed* movies. Character-wise, the CGI is not a serious effort to cross the uncanny valley, but some vaguely astron-gothic designs (city architecture and ship interiors in particular) are frequently a close match in quality for backdrops in live-action space movies with a similar scale. So this is probably well worth seeing if you always enjoy such colourful, action-packed spectaculars.

After thirty years in prison for a murder that she didn't commit, widowed Dulce returns home to **THE HOUSE AT THE END OF TIME** (DVD, 27 April). Her reminiscing becomes flashbacks that tell the story of what actually happened to her husband and [illegible] two sons. This plays like a Venezuelan soap opera at first, until it's disturbed by mysterious intruders, rattling door handles and making only ghostly appearances. A local priest is

Shipwrecked outlaws, exiled from Norse homelands, take a Scottish woman prisoner, but getting a ransom for her proves more difficult than our fugitives ever imagined, in Claudio Fah's romantic actioner **NORTHMEN** (DVD, 27 April). Captain Asbjorn (Tom Hopper, Sir Percival in TV's *Merlin*) is pleasantly surprised to find that his feisty captive is king's daughter Lady Inghean (Charlie Murphy), and she might be particularly useful as a psychic seer for his gang of runaways. From the local kingdom, Inghean's ruthless father sends his Carpathian 'wolf pack' of mercenaries to hunt down the Vikings. The killers on horseback benefit from falcon-guided tracking, and Asbjorn's men are befriended by kung fu monk Conall, played by Ryan Kwanten from *True Blood*. Kwanten is unrecognisable here, but his 'Shaolin-Pict' fighting style and cowboy swagger add comicbook appeal to this movie, and he is Asbjorn's efficient ally against the mostly anonymous yet fearsome hunters that wear skull-fronts on the backs of their helmets.

The carefree Vikings learn caution when they encounter ambushes and death-traps dotted around the hills and moors – of location shooting in Germany and South Africa – although the bloodiest of the swords 'n' arrows violence occurs just off-screen. Also absent from the landscapes is any sense that *Northmen* is set in bonny Scotland. As many of the Vikings are killed in running battles, the storyline's situation begins to resemble *The Most Dangerous Game*. Swiss-born director Fah's track record in genre is spotty. Effects-laden comedy-adventure *Coronado*, about an American woman in a foreign revolution, was followed by the watchable invisibility actioner *Hollow Man 2*, but his work on web-episodes for TV spin-off *Ghost Whisperer: The Other Side*, and yet another sequel *Sniper: Reloaded*, suggest a jobbing approach to his LA residency. *Northmen* has corny dialogue that continues after the time for talking is over, and its combat stunts are all routinely over-edited so that fast-cutting spoils the potential for fluidity in every modestly effective action sequence.

oddly sympathetic towards Dulce, and his presence proves to be vital to the unfolding plot, especially when he discovers that her once-abandoned, seemingly haunted, house was previously owned by its builder, an Englishman with links to the cult of Masons.

Pedantically paced, and without much atmosphere beyond that of melodrama, this first movie by Alejandro Hidalgo owes heavy debts to Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others* and Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* but lacks their intrigues or superbly timed twists. Basically a hybrid sci-fi mystery-horror, this is hampered by pointless subplots – such as the naughty children making 'water bombs' from balloons filled with urine – and so, despite a lively last thirty minutes, the first hour drags interminably and feels like a short film stretched out, unfeasibly, to feature-length. Its Shyamalan-esque structure is only there to mislead viewers into thinking that the time-travellers, from an unseen future, are a supernatural menace that not even the priest believes in. It is too easy for the mind to wander while waiting for something interesting to happen in this movie (a slow-starter not a slow-burner), and I was wondering why genre dramas featuring a young priest – of the celibate type, in particular – are invariably cast with a devilishly handsome stereotype? What demographic are the makers hoping to appeal to?

Made in 1988, **MOONDIAL** (DVD, 4 May) is a TV serial of six half-hour episodes, a BBC children's show adapted (from her own novel) by Helen Cresswell. Although it is framed as a rather spooky drama with some gothic imagery under lunar influence, it's actually a time-travel adventure with generic ties to Francis Hodgson Burnett's classic *The Secret Garden*. Latchkey schoolgirl Araminta 'Minty' Cane (Siri Neal, with bo-ho curls) is packed off to stay with godmother 'aunt' Mary for a cottage holiday. After an off-screen car accident Misty's single-mum Kate is left in a coma, and although there's "no sense getting morbid" our teenage heroine's isolation prompts emotional retreat into inexplicable fantasy (filmed on location at Belton House in Lincolnshire).

Reassuring authority Mister (Old) 'World' guides Minty's exploration of manor lodge gardens to a sundial focus point for a reality-spin with vortex intensity, slipping back to Victorian times, where she meets Dickensian orphan Tom, the 'twelve-abouts' kitchen-boy and aspiring footman ("You ain't paid thirty shillings a year to wink!"); then further to an apparently Georgian era, where Misty and Tom spy upon hooded Sarah, whose facial marks and lonely nocturnal appearances mean she is unfairly tormented by local kids as "the devil's child".

Back in the present, Minty visits her unconscious mother in the ICU ward, and records cassette instalments for Walkman playback to her, a witty conceit enhancing the ambiguity of audio-taped ghost-storytelling here, re-casting the mischievous Tom as just an imaginary friend. This delves further into imaginative pursuits when witchy Raven, the mysterious ghost-hunter, appears at Aunty Mary's place, because Raven is portrayed by Jacqueline Pearce (Servalan in *Blake's 7*), who also shows up in the past as wicked governess Miss Vole, the source of all Sarah's distress.

The first half unfolds with leisurely disquiet, and, reportedly, its slow approach led to a 'movie edit' released in 1995, but this complete version restores the character arcs, a foreboding atmosphere, and many incidental details of daylight chills, before a Halloween finale to rescue poor Tom and Sarah from cases of hardship and theatrical malice. This is never quite as entertaining as *Children of the Stones* (1977), but it is a good match, quality-wise, for *Red Shift* (*Interzone* #255).

Clearly intending to be a post-holocaust action thriller, wannabe *The Well* is re-titled **THE LAST SURVIVORS** (DVD, 4 May). Here is an American future where climatic disasters have turned the US northwest into a dustbowl, and so with purposeful locale casting the Mojave stands in for an Oregon valley, where scavenger Kendal (Haley Lu Richardson, in her first starring role) trudges through desert flats, protecting a farm's well that saves her from the drought. Our teenage heroine pits her wits against outlaw gangs, but so many longueurs shot on badly lit interiors, with poor sound quality that results in mumbled dialogue, drain all spirit or drama from this unimpressive feature.

Cult films such as *A Boy and His Dog* and Luc Besson's *The Last Battle* were made with science fictional imagination and visionary flair. But this bland offering is a generally drab and dismally uninventive affair. Even the climactic cat-fight is simply a lifeless confrontation that never feels like it's a life or death struggle. So, lacking any fresh sci-fi ideas or vividly stylised combat scenes, this is just too much of a plodder for viewing as anything more than low-budget film-making for the sake of it.

The director is obvious novice Thomas S. Hammock, whose other genre credits include production designer on Adam Wingard's *You're Next* and *The Guest*. Go back to your drawing board please.

LATE ARRIVALS

THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES (Blu-ray/DVD, 20 April).

EXODUS: GODS AND KINGS (Blu-ray/DVD, 27 April).

RZ-9 (DVD, 18 May).

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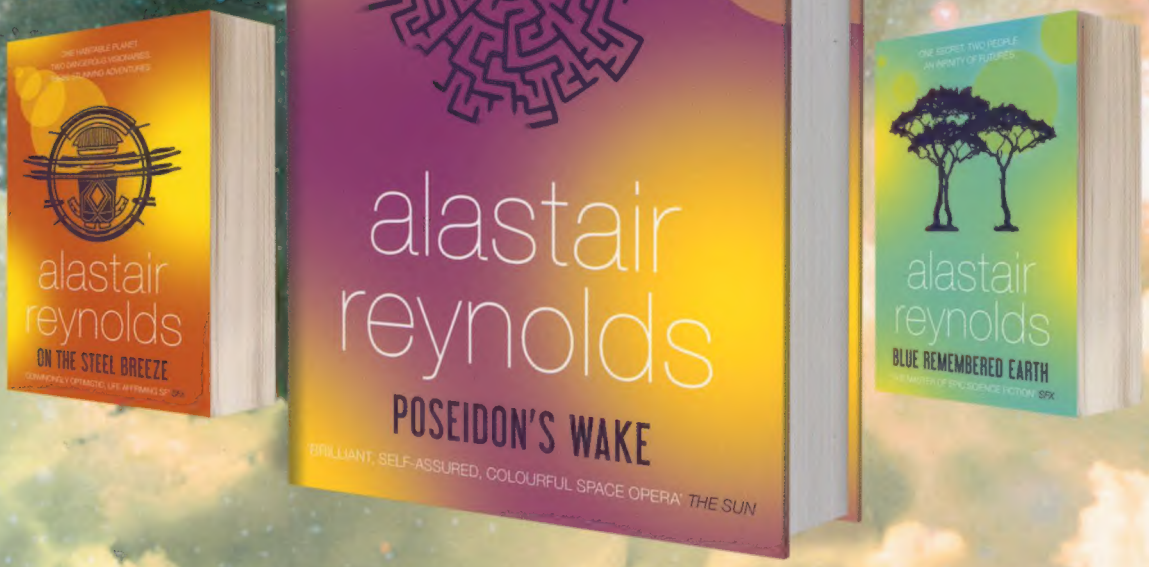

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